SFX

STAR WARS: THE ACOLYTE
JEDI CRIME DRAMA!

THE STRANGERS CHAPTER 1
IS TAMARA HOME?

FURIOSA
A MAD MAX SAGA!

CONEHEADS
REVISITING THE 1993 CLASSIC

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

DOCTOR WHO

SFX goes ROGUE on-set for the Regency episode

FUTURE

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PLUS! BLAKE'S 7 / THE BEAST / MARVEL PRIDE / STING / THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH
JURASSIC WORLD: CHAOS THEORY / ULTRAMAN: RISING / ORPHAN BLACK: ECHOES

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

ESMIE JIKIEMI-PEARSON

THE CHURCH ON RUBY ROAD

THE TARGET NOVELISATION OF THE FIRST FULL ADVENTURE FEATURING THE FIFTEENTH DOCTOR

SCAN TO ORDER

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It's all about Eve in this game.

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Test your brains down in Africa.

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Captain's Log

I promise you, there *are* photos of me inside the TARDIS. One day they'll probably end up on a Blu-ray, but alas not in print yet. Instead here I am *outside* it, being photobombed by a fan. It feels like a blur having been at the world premiere for season one of *Doctor Who* – it's been such a long time coming!

By now you'll have travelled to an alien baby farm and back in time to the '60s – but there's still so much more to come, and we're jumping a little further forward (and yet a little further backward) to episode six and the Regency period, to a set visit from over a year ago. Confused? Yes, we are a bit too. Talk about sitting on a secret.

Other delights are in store – it was a joy to see Jinkx Monsoon in *Little Shop Of Horrors* in New York and to chat all things Maestro. Why was *SFX* in New York? Spoilers! Elsewhere in this issue, *The Strangers* return with a new trilogy – bad luck for anyone called Tamara. There's also a new *Star Wars* series! Remember when that used to be big? I'm joking, I'm joking, don't write in. No really, don't – we haven't got a letters page any more.

There's even more fantastic stuff working through production following the strikes, so even though we're busy and don't know what day or time period it is, this really is just the calm before the (time) storm... And season one of *Doctor Who* isn't even done yet!

Darren
X

Get in touch!

Email
sfx@futurenet.com

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Jinkx Monsoon is fantastic in "The Devil's Chord" – this new world feels dangerous again.
→ She's also fantastic in *Little Shop Of Horrors*, playing off-Broadway until 26 May – see it while you can!
→ *Sting* is sinister (no, not the musician). Made my skin crawl – loved it!
→ A satisfactory conclusion to the Michonne/Rick storyline in *The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live*, but no second season please. Let it be.

RANTS

→ I love *American Horror Story*, but the *Delicate* season really pushes the boundaries of even my adoration.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Pleased as punch with Character Options's latest set of *Doctor Who* figures, themed around 1979's "Destiny Of The Daleks". Can we have a three Nimons set next, please?
→ Speaking of Daleks, I will be buying Panini's collections of the brilliant back-up strips from *Doctor Who Weekly* (first volume: *The Return Of The Daleks*, due 1 July) – even though I own every issue.
→ Very excited to see that Severin have a four-disc set of Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Santa Sangre* on the way. Such an insane film...

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Pleased that *Fallout* has been renewed. Thought the finale fell a little flat, but otherwise the first season was joyful.

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ As much as I was delighted by *Fallout*, I might be even happier that it has resulted in a boatload of new people discovering the games. Now we just need a *BioShock* TV adaptation. Pretty please?

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Excited that Spielberg's returning to UFOs with his next movie. Just imagine a *Close Encounters* sequel, with Roy Neary finally returning to Earth and one almighty backdated alimony claim...
→ Check out *Doctor Who* author Paul Magrs's YouTube channel. Lots of nostalgic rummaging through musty old paperbacks, from Puffins to Targets. Hours of bibliophile joy.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ David Lynch and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* fans, seek out *I Saw The TV Glow*. A surreal and visually arresting exploration of identity and purpose that will grab anyone who has escaped into their favourite show. Justice Smith is incredible.
→ *Interview With The Vampire* season two doesn't skip a beat as it relocates to Europe and the vampiric hedonism of the era swallows Louis and Claudia whole. The Dubai storyline is also cooking in unexpected ways.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

JUNE 2024

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WORLD WIDE WEB

Director Kiah Roache-Turner faces his fears in *Sting*

Highlights

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ULTRAMAN: RISING

→ This Netflix animated movie is the 44th film in the franchise. Beat that.

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ORPHAN BLACK: ECHOES

→ Back to black – a spin-off seven years after the original series ended.

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STAR TREK: CELEBRATIONS

→ A celebration of all things Pride with a host of LGBTQ+ characters.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Beauty And The Beast

Director Bertrand Bonello talks his vision of an artificial tomorrow in **The Beast**

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

TWENTY YEARS FROM now, in Bertrand Bonello's vision of the future *The Beast*, artificial intelligence has taken control after a mysterious event changed the course of history. To remove any chance of another calamity, the robots have created a machine that helps humans live out their ancestors' past lives. They thus become emotionally numb – and therefore stable – in the present day.

The message is clear: if we're not careful, technology will eat away at what makes us human. "It's not that much science fiction," the French filmmaker remarks. "It's something we are going through now. I mean, technology, it's a tool, and humans must be the master of a tool, not the contrary. And now it's getting a little scary."

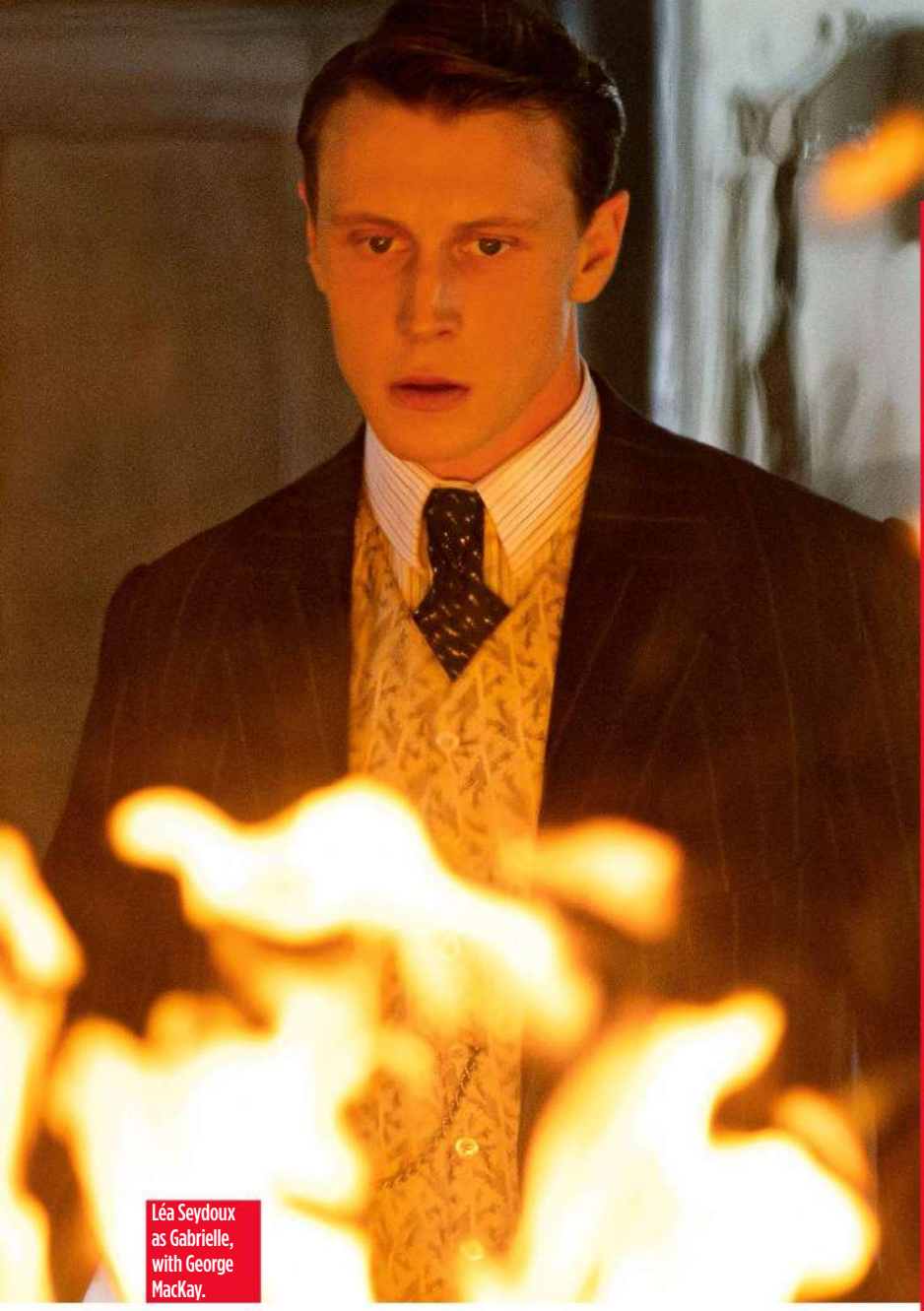
Bonello – known for his idiosyncratic dramas *Nocturama*, *Saint Laurent* and *House Of Tolerance* – started writing the script in 2017, back when AI was yet to become such a hotly debated topic. By the time *The Beast* played at Venice and Toronto festivals last year, following months of writers' and actors' strikes, the film seemed a little too prescient. "I was working with scientists, specialists in AI, on the script," he says. "I was aware of many things, many dangers, but I really thought it would be many years away."

The Beast is not simply a story about the future. In fact, its primary source of inspiration is Henry James's 1903 novella *The Beast In The Jungle*. Bonello's version takes the story's themes – predominantly those of fear and love – and transposes them onto a time-twisting melodrama, the focus being on Léa Seydoux's Gabrielle in the year 2044 as she enters the consciousnesses of two relatives: a high-society Parisian woman in 1910 and an aspiring actor in 2014.

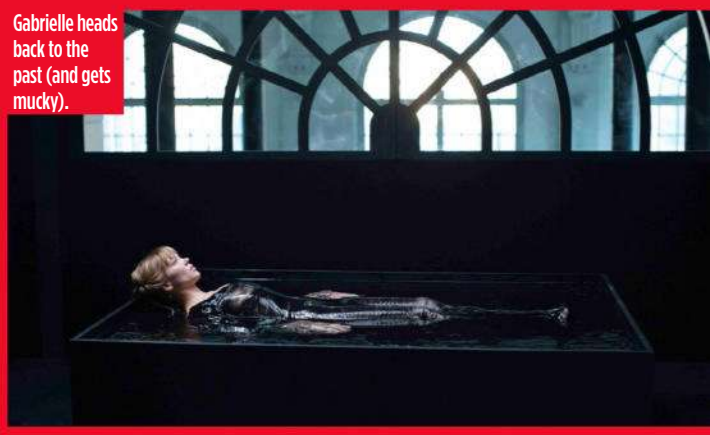
All three of Seydoux's characters become entangled with different incarnations of the same man, portrayed by George MacKay, the result being a doomed romance that plays out across multiple timelines. Each year was chosen for a very specific reason. "In 1910, we entered the 20th century, full of hopes about what the century will be," Bonello explains. "No war, no disease, but it's when we had this flood in Paris." The second, 2014, was chosen because the real-life misogynistic murderer Elliot Rodger was active during this period, with MacKay playing a terrifying incel inspired by the killer. It's a section of the film that feels akin to a slasher. "Then there's 2044 because I really wanted it to be very, very close to us," the director says. "I mean, we remember 20 years ago and 20 years later, it's not so far."

The futuristic setting was the

Director Bertrand Bonello: needs a rest.



Léa Seydoux as Gabrielle, with George MacKay.



Gabrielle heads back to the past (and gets mucky).

The 1910 versions of Gabrielle and her beau...

...compared to slightly less stylish versions in 2014.

most difficult to get right, as Bonello had to invent the look of tomorrow. "I'm not used to that, it's my first time doing something like this," he says. "I wanted to avoid the two major traps that are in science fiction, either the hypersonic technology or the post-apocalyptic. I wanted to find a third way, so I decided to take the world as it is today and to remove things, to empty it. There are no more cars, no more internet, no more screens. There are normal sounds, and you do meet people, but it's minimal."

The machine that Gabrielle enters to head back into the past is perhaps the most sci-fi device on show; a black bath reminiscent of the one that Stellan Skarsgård's Baron Harkonnen emerges from in *Dune*. "We tried many things and everything that looked like a machine didn't work for me," Bonello says. "It was like fake science fiction stuff. So we went back to the idea of a liquid. Then we had to invent the texture of the liquid, which ended up being this black thick stuff. For me, the image was stronger than the technological."

> **"Technology, it's a tool, and humans must be the master of a tool, not the contrary"**

When asked about the films that influenced *The Beast*, Bonello doesn't name any of the usual sci-fi stalwarts but instead says that, just before writing, he watched two classics: Martin Scorsese's period romance *The Age Of Innocence* and Fred Walton's cult 1979 horror *When a Stranger Calls*, about a babysitter who's terrorised by a psychopathic killer.

Scorsese's work clearly left its mark on the 1910 sequence, while the horror elements are felt in the terrifying 2014 segment, in which Seydoux must fend for herself while home alone. Frankly, it's a lot of ideas to throw into a single film.

"I feel this film really emptied me," Bonello says with some exasperation. "I put a lot into this film. A lot of obsessions. I came out of it exhausted and I have to live again." That, at least, definitely sounds like an emotional human talking...

The Beast is in cinemas from 31 May.

SCI-FACT! **George MacKay read incel killer Elliot Rodger's manifesto, and watched videos in order to copy some of his mannerisms.**

Sean Giambrone voices Ben Pincus.

PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

Dino Noir

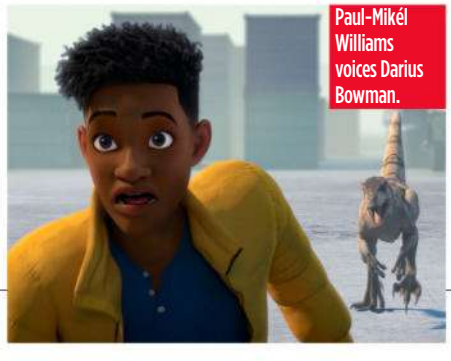
Scott Kreamer explains the major shifts in the darker, scarier **Jurassic World: Chaos Theory** series WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

TWO YEARS AGO, THE SERIES finale of DreamWorks' animated show *Jurassic World: Camp Cretaceous* ended with an unexpected two-year time jump that gave audiences a look at the more grown up "Nublar Six" and their fates. Plus, the nifty coda reveal of a Brachiosaurus outside Darius's window meant the series timeline caught up to the events of *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*.

While the open-ended climax may have felt like a set up for future stories, executive producer Scott Kreamer tells Red Alert that in his mind it was unquestionably an ending to their five seasons of storytelling. He was ready to move on to new projects, until Universal and DreamWorks reached out for his thoughts on potential continuations.

"I was unconvinced, because I liked the story we told," Kreamer says of the *Camp Cretaceous* story. "It was a nice beginning, middle and end." However, he relented and participated in a brainstorming meeting that was concurrent with the post-production of *Jurassic World Dominion*. "It was so secret that they wouldn't show us a rough cut," Kreamer remembers. "But we got on this big Zoom call with people from Universal who were pitching us what happened in the movie with some art and pictures, and I got an idea that I couldn't get out of my head.

"It's funny, our executive Maria Crenna was on the call so she saw my face and went, 'You just had an idea!'"



Paul-Mikél Williams voices Darius Bowman.

Kreamer's big idea is *Jurassic World: Chaos Theory*, a darker, more mature animated series. Set about six years after *Camp Cretaceous* and a few months after the events of *Dominion*, it sees Darius and the Nublar Six living their lives in a world where dinos exist among humanity.

"I didn't want to do a rehash," Kreamer says. "I didn't want to go back in the timeline with some other people on an island." Instead, Kreamer went all in with pulling Darius and the others into the world of "Dark Jurassic" conspiracy theories, placing them on the receiving end of a shadowy organisation that has already irrevocably changed each of their lives.

Citing thrillers like *The Parallax View* (1974) and *Three Days Of The Condor* (1975) as major inspirations, Kreamer admits the dramatic tonal shift confused some. "The first time I remember pitching one of the higher-ups, he was a little... stunned may be too far," Kreamer explains. "He just said, 'That was not what I

Here, cheer up lads, it might never happen, eh?

> **I think people are probably going to be split on how they feel about 'hunky Ben'**

was expecting you to say.'" Yet no one baulked at the idea, not even Kreamer's fellow *Cretaceous* producers and eventual *Chaos Theory* collaborators, including the franchise's executive producer Colin Trevorrow.

"I talked about mood and tone, and we all really wanted to push that with silence and inky blacks, cinematography and lighting to really tell a moody, creepy [story]," he says. "We want the audience to feel what the kids are feeling, which is, 'What's going on?'" Another potential shock concerns the "glow up" of the characters. While the entire voice cast returned, their onscreen counterparts look, ahem, different. "Obviously a lot of people had a lot of opinions on this," Kreamer laughs regarding audience reactions to the unexpected hotness in the trailer, especially when it comes to a now-jacked Ben.

"I think people are probably going to be split on how they feel about, as we call him, 'hunky Ben', but we love the idea of it," Kreamer says. "It was fun, because it still has to look like the character, so that's job one. Then you do want to evolve and go, 'What would six years [later] look like?'"

The same goes for the dinos in the series, which are extremely present in the everyday lives of humanity. Teasing what species will be featured, Kreamer says, "We have all the dinosaurs that plausibly came out of Lockwood Estates. We definitely wanted to do some new dinosaurs, but we definitely have those guardrails up.

"I'm excited about the new dinosaurs that we're gonna get to show, and hopefully everyone else will be too."

As for how long this mystery can go on, Kreamer says he's excited about what they have planned and hope audiences enjoy *Chaos Theory* so that they can keep going.

"Look, the fact that we got to tell the story we told the first time was so great, and so not typical," he admits. "Then to get a chance to do this, it's just really fun. We just kept swinging for the fences. I'm not saying it was always received how we wanted it to," he laughs, referring to the executives' reactions. "But it's the show we wanted to do, and I think it's pretty good."

Ben and Darius better have spare batteries.

Jurassic World: Chaos Theory is on Netflix from 24 May.

SCI-FACT! **Dinosaurs from *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* and *Dominion* are canon to use in *Chaos Theory*.**

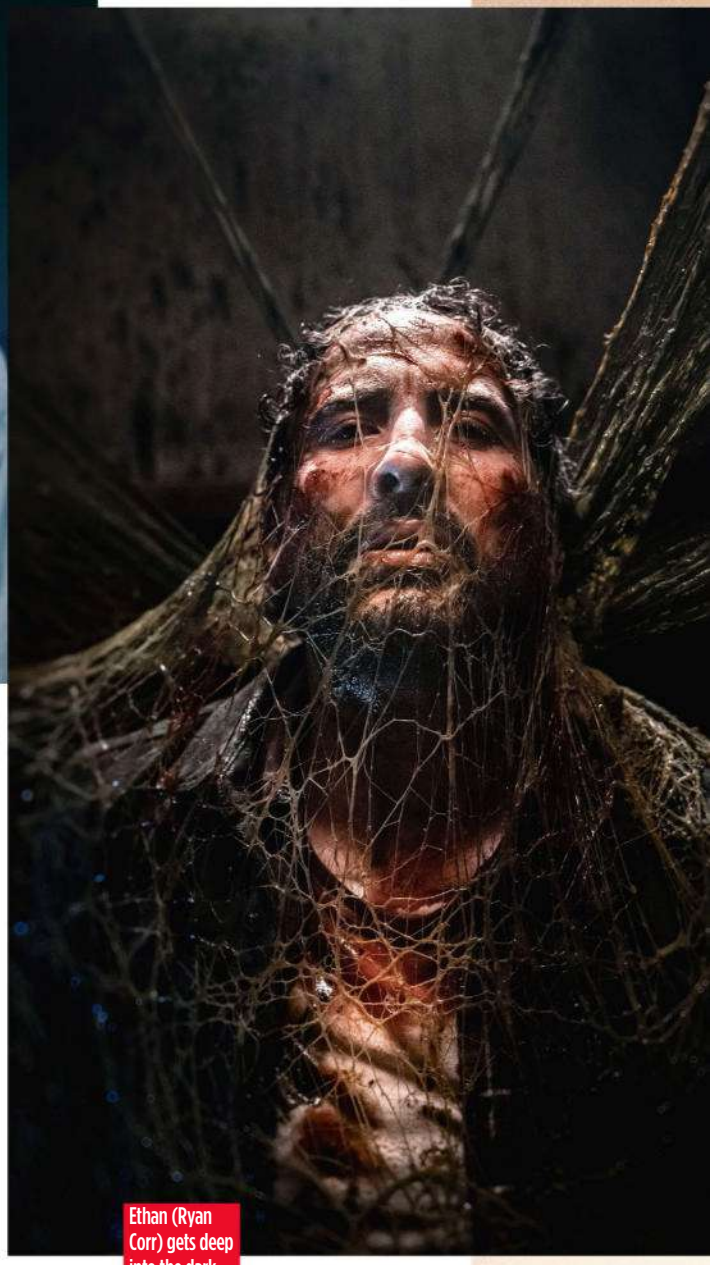
NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Watch the skies! Steven Spielberg directing a UFO-themed movie from a screenplay by David Koepp.
→ Julia Garner playing the Silver Surfer in Marvel's **The Fantastic Four**.
→ Drew Goddard writing and directing a fifth instalment of **The Matrix**.
→ *Andor*'s Beau Willimon scripting **Star Wars: Dawn Of The Jedi** for James Mangold.
→ **Transformers** and **GI Joe** franchises set for cinema team-up.
→ **The Mandalorian & Grogu** arriving 22 May 2026.
→ Glen Powell to star in Edgar Wright's adap of Stephen King's **The Running Man**.
→ Olivia Wilde directing a movie based on Rob Liefeld comic **Avengelyne**.
→ Lionsgate and Blumhouse teaming on a new version of **The Blair Witch Project**.
→ **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Last Ronin** set for "R-rated" live-action adaptation.
→ *Citadel*'s Josh Appelbaum and Andre Nemec writing **Space Mountain** for Disney.
→ Keanu Reeves voicing Shadow in **Sonic The Hedgehog 3**. Whoah!

HANNA LASSEN/GETTY

Alyla Browne as Charlotte, with her teeny friend.



Ethan (Ryan Corr) gets deep into the dark web.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Eight-Legged Freak

The director of the *Alien*-influenced **Sting** talks about his spider horror

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

RED ALERT HAS WOKEN UP EARLY to catch Kiah Roache-Turner on Zoom. No coffee has been drunk, but that doesn't matter – the very first story the Australia-based filmmaker tells is terrifying enough to put even the most hardened horror fan on high alert.

"This has happened to me a couple of times," he says with a grin. "I'll wake up in the morning and I'll pull my curtains apart, and there'll just be a huntsman spider on the glass right in front of my face. I scream like a little girl. They are the size of your hand, but they aren't as bad as funnel-webs, which are these massive, hairy things that can kill you."

Gulp. No wonder Roache-Turner developed arachnophobia. Yet, rather than shy away from his fears, the writer/director has embraced them, making feature-length horror film *Sting*, about an alien spider that invades a New York apartment building and proceeds to take out the human inhabitants one by one.

"I'm kind of remaking *Alien*," he says. "It's just the perfect science fiction horror. It's effectively a haunted house movie with a giant killer alien. There was always something spider-like about that Giger creation in *Alien*, it felt insectoid, and I wanted to make something that was a scary single-location horror, with one family."

Swap the Nostromo for a few New York apartments, the ship's crew for a dysfunctional family and the eponymous antagonist for a spider, and you have a good idea what *Sting*'s about. But this isn't a simple *Alien* clone; it's a monster movie that stands on its own (eight) legs.

"It's weird, nobody's really done a giant spider movie and treated it like a proper horror movie, and I wanted this to feel real," Roache-Turner says. The filmmaker's aim was to make *Sting* a commercial movie that wasn't just scary and fun, but emotional too. "Something that could harken back to the days of [Steven Spielberg's studio] Amblin, when they were doing *Poltergeist*. I'm a big fan of Spielberg's horror. He's one of the great horror filmmakers – *Jurassic Park* is essentially a really expensive, well-made horror film for the family. *Duel* is a horror film with a truck.

Puppeteer Kailah Cabanas with her not so teeny friend.

Probably safe to say, it's not one for arachnophobes.

Frank (Jermaine Fowler) investigates. Oh dear...

"*Jaws* is one of the greatest horror films of all time. He creates such accessible central characters, that way he creates a family unit that you love. You care about his characters, and I wanted to try something like that in a classic style."

Sting's heart comes in the form of a young teenager called Charlotte, who adopts the alien spider when it's just the size of a thimble (don't worry, it grows considerably in size). For Roache-Turner, two things had to be nailed for the movie to work: the design of the spider and the casting of Charlotte. Luckily, Alyla Browne was available.

"I looked at one clip of her and I was like, 'Jesus, cast her immediately!' She was seven or eight and she was crying and weeping, and she did it with an American accent and then an Australian one; two different characters, two accents. I'm like, 'She's a genius.' She's just phenomenal. She's made a career up until this point being cast as the young version of people like Nicole Kidman, or Sigourney Weaver's daughter, and the reason for that is because she emanates the same star factor. She's like a living, breathing special effect."

> **"Nobody's really done a giant spider movie and treated it like a proper horror movie"**

Speaking of special effects, that's exactly how the spider was created. At first, the beast is a tiny CG creation, but as it becomes larger, the team at Wētā FX, who worked on the film, decided to employ a huge practical model.

"I found it very difficult to be in the room with the creature," says Roache-Turner. "When it was sitting there, I was okay. But when it starts moving, the mandibles move, the mouth opens, and the puppeteers would do this jerky movement where the thing comes right at you. I really didn't like that...

"I was hoping it would be kind of like exposure therapy – maybe I'd have to deal with so many spiders that it might cure me. It hasn't at all. Anytime I see a spider, I nearly have a heart attack, it hasn't helped. But I'm a horror filmmaker, I should be taking my worst nightmares and throwing them at you."

Despite his ongoing arachnophobia, Roache-Turner's ready for round two if the film is a success. "It will probably be called *Children Of Sting*, which immediately tells you what the plot is," he says. "It's like *The Raid* with giant spiders. If *Sting* is *Alien*, then this would be like *Aliens*. There's probably heavy weaponry involved."

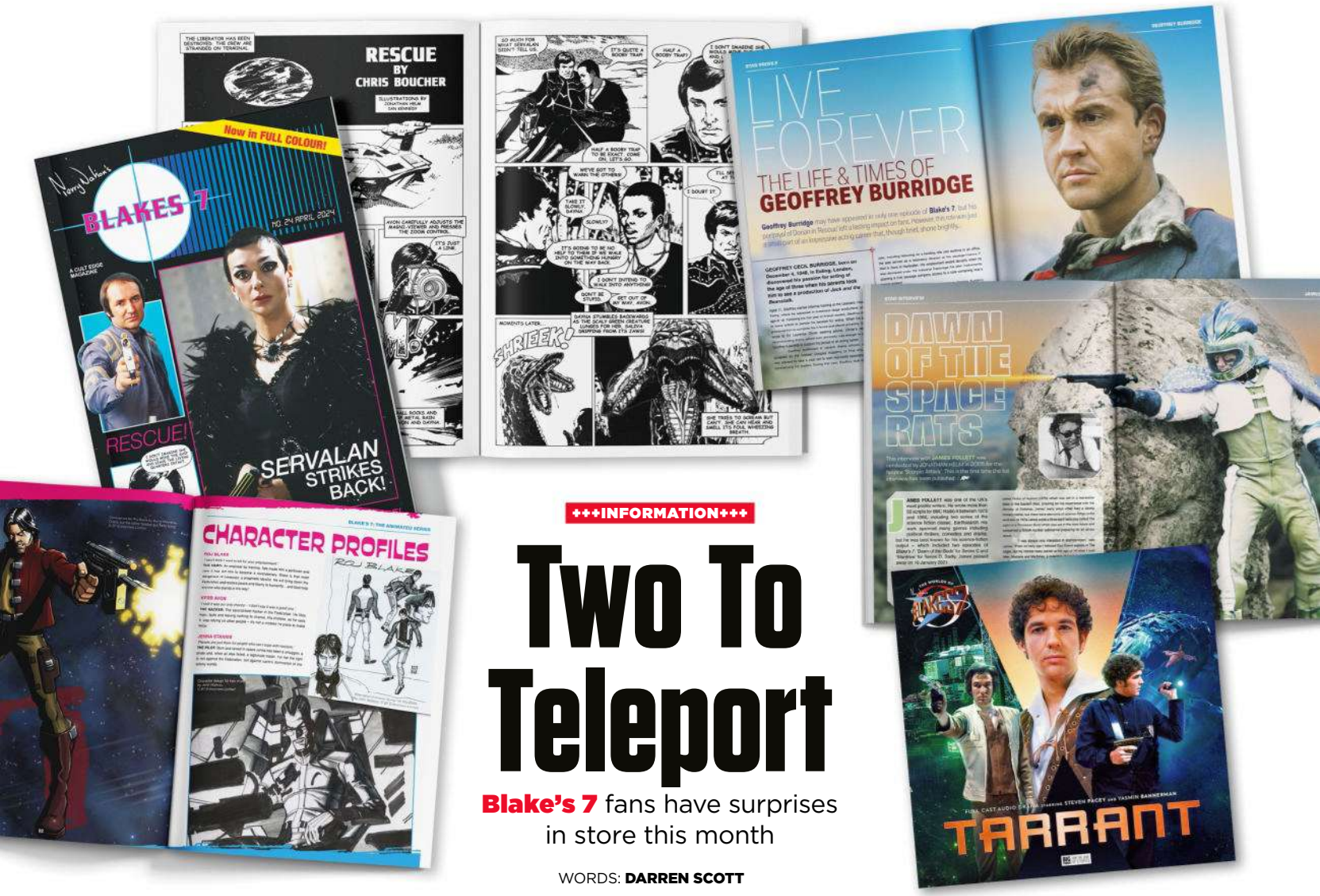
Now we're truly awake.

Sting is in cinemas from 31 May.

SCI-FACT! **Alyla Browne can next be seen in another Australian production, George Miller's *Furiosa*, as an even younger Furiosa.**

COURTESY OF STUDIOCANAL.

SCI-FACT! **A revival of *Blake's 7* was announced by Sky in 2008, but later cancelled to focus on "new drama and comedy".**



+++INFORMATION+++

Two To Teleport

Blake's 7 fans have surprises in store this month

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

HOT ON THE HEELS OF THEIR critically acclaimed *Blake's 7 Production Diary Series A* book, Cult Edge are back with a long-overdue publication. In fact, it's been 41 years since the last edition of *Blake's 7 Magazine*, so perhaps that's another contender for "longest-running sci-fi magazine"...?

This special edition – it's a whopping 120 pages – continues the title's penchant for *Series D*, with interviews, behind-the-scenes information and rare photographs. There's a comic strip of opening episode "Rescue" and also a look at the proposed animated series from 2010, including unseen concept art. *Blake's 7 Magazine* issue 24 will also benefit charity Terrence Higgins Trust. The centrepiece of the issue is an in-depth profile of actor Geoffrey Burridge, who played Dorian in "Rescue". Burridge sadly died in 1987, aged just 38, due to complications from AIDS-related illnesses.

> **"The centrepiece of the issue is an in-depth profile of actor Geoffrey Burridge, who played Dorian in 'Rescue'"**

The magazine is available now from bit.ly/b7magazine24 priced £21.25 – new customers can use the code WELCOME15 to get 15% off. Check out @cult_edge on X for further information/discount codes.

Creators Jonathan Helm and Grahame Roberston haven't ruled out further issues and are currently working on *Blake's 7 Production Diary Series B*, due for publication in November.

Elsewhere, Big Finish returns to Terry Nation's universe with the upcoming June release of a new audio box set. *The World's Of Blake's 7: Tarrant* sees the return of Steven Pacey for three full-cast stories, alongside Yasmin Bannerman as Dayna and Alistair Lock as Orac. It's available to pre-order from bigfinish.com now.

Steven Pacey and Yasmin Bannerman star in *Tarrant*.

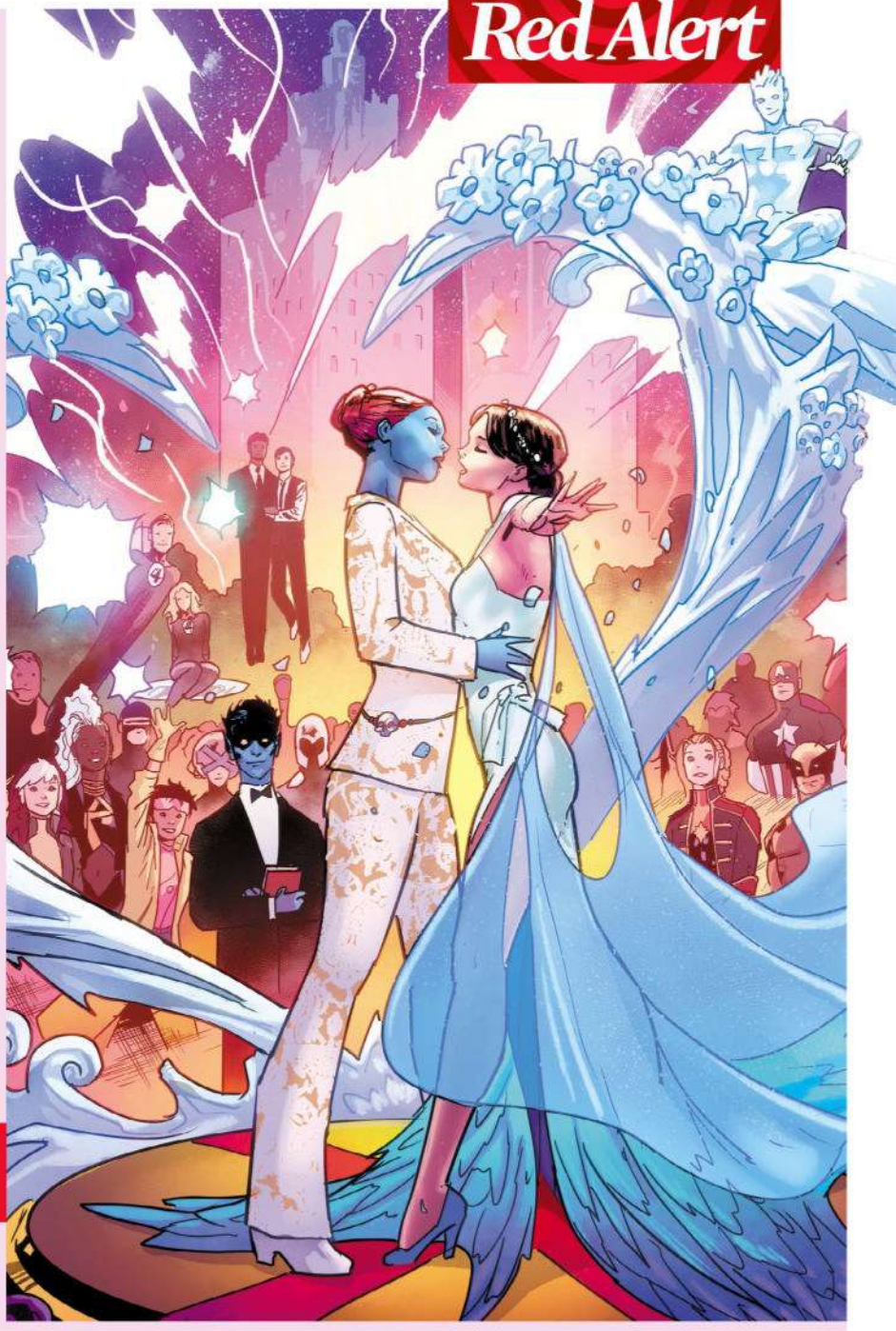
Follow @bigfinish and @cult_edge on X for more details.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Pride Of Place

Wedding bells ring for Mystique and Destiny in this year's **Marvel Voices: Pride**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



Raise your glasses for the couple. RAISE THEM. NOW.

PROMISING "SOMETHING NEW, also borrowed and especially blue", Kieron Gillen is bringing his stint on the Merry Mutants to a close with *X-Men: The Wedding Special*. Centring on the marriage of Mystique and Destiny, the special coda issue takes the lead in this year's *Marvel Voices: Pride*, which also features contributions from Tini Howard, Wyatt Kennedy, Tate Brombal and Yoon Ha Lee.

"Given how bleak most of my run was, perhaps it's the after-credits-have-fun-with-the-cast sequence," Gillen tells Red Alert. "It's also the interstitial between the Krakoan age and the next as it grows from everything I have done with Raven and Irene, but it also sets up where they're going next. Marriage is about endlessness, but so is the Marvel Universe."

Many Marvel characters have tied the knot over the years – most memorably Northstar and Jean-Paul Beaubier's first same sex nuptials in 2012's *Astonishing X-Men* 51 – but this being a union between two perhaps erstwhile bad guys means that there won't be any of the inevitable slugfests that often occur at such celebrations.

"Every wedding is primarily about the two people getting married, and should speak to who they are, and as these two are literal supervillains that implies this is going to have a very different energy," says Gillen. "Disruption always happens at superheroic weddings because of supervillains but we already have the supervillains here, looking immaculate and swearing vows to one another, so I'm sure this will be a disruption-free zone and the story doesn't end with everything on fire."

Having charted their history back to Victorian times, the happy couple have played an increasingly prominent role in the Krakoan Age, which began with 2019's *Powers* and *House of X*. "Mystique and Destiny met in the 19th century and have been circling one another ever since, and that's a great way to talk about life – and queer life especially – across a large canvas," says Gillen, who has enjoyed exploring the ramifications of their respective powers.

"There's the irony that while Mystique changes her form in every way, her personality and sense of self is rock-solid," he continues. "She knows exactly who she is and will not compromise, no matter what. Destiny, knowing the future, often does – she's all about choosing the best route to the destination she wants, and that's the tension between the two of them, and where the drama lies."

Gillen also revealed in 2022's *Immortal X-Men* 8 that Destiny was actually Irene Adler and that the shape-changing Mystique had taken on the guise of Sherlock Holmes. "There's less Holmesian elements than you'd have hoped for," he says of *X-Men: The Wedding Special*. "There's elements from across their history but I didn't specifically bring any 221B Baker Street vibes, although if I'd had another two pages, I almost certainly would have."

Gillen also enjoyed working with artist Rachael Stott. "She works in a classic clean style, which grounds it in the superhero idiom," he says. "But she's also, by nature, an absolute chaos goblin, and the mix of the two is exactly what the story is about. It's a romantic black comedy, and she owns that."

X-Men: The Wedding Special issue one is out on 29 May.

SCI-FACT! Mystique first appeared in 1978's *Ms Marvel* issues 16-18 while Destiny debuted in 1980's *Uncanny X-Men* 141.

Ultraman needs to deal with the kaiju Emi.

> "We referenced classic anime, manga and illustration"

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Bringing Up Baby Kaiju

Writer/director Shannon Tindle updates the Ultraman character for a new generation in his much-anticipated animated feature film **Ultraman: Rising**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

ALMOST 60 YEARS AGO, Japanese special effects legend/filmmaker Eiji Tsuburaya unleashed his live-action sci-fi series *Ultra Q* (1966) upon the world; think *The X-Files* meets *The Twilight Zone* with extra monsters. It featured a red and silver-suited alien superhero called Ultraman who battled kaiju and monsters to protect the masses. Kids adored the character and Ultraman became an instant sensation.

For six decades, kaiju-loving kids (and plenty of their parents) continue to follow his evolution. There have been countless iterations of Ultraman in both live action and animated form, in manga, comic books and videogames. In 2019, Netflix debuted a new *Ultraman* anime series to huge success, which opened the door for the latest iteration in the animated feature film *Ultraman: Rising*.

Director Shannon Tindle (*Kubo And The Two Strings*) tells Red Alert that as a kid he loved Ultraman, and in 2001 actively started developing his own original story – called *Made In Japan* – that was inspired by the character. "I never thought there would be any way I could get the rights to the characters and at that time, I couldn't have," Tindle says of Tsuburaya Productions' ongoing rights battles.

But that didn't stop him from drafting his own detailed concept art while developing the script... just in case. Once Netflix got the rights for the Ultraman anime, that dovetailed into a potential animated Ultraman film. When Netflix executive Armie Kubian asked Tindle if he was interested in using his *Japan* script to do so, "I said, 'Well, nerd me is very excited by that. But producer/director me wants to make a movie that I want to make,'" he remembers. "They said, 'We support that whether it's going to be Ultraman or not – we want to make the movie.'"

In the end, Tindle and writer Marc Haimes polished the director's long-gestating story into *Ultraman: Rising*, which introduces the character to yet another generation in a gorgeously stylised, contemporary version set in Japan. The film places the suit – and its vast responsibilities – into the hands of baseball star Ken Sato (Christopher Sean) who has a familial link to the Ultraman legacy. Initially a reluctant hero, Sato's world is turned upside down when he's forced to raise a baby kaiju after a fierce battle with its mother.

Tindle is grateful that Tsuburaya was very open to taking big swings with the character in this medium. "Since Ultraman has rarely been adapted for animation, we had a lot of freedom," he says. "Because this film

"I think it's looking at you." "No, *you*."

Ken Sato (voiced by Christopher Sean).

Quick, crank up the plushie merch machine!

is about legacy – both the legacy of Ultraman as a character and the legacy parents leave for their children – I wanted the look to be somewhat nostalgic," he adds. "I wanted it to feel like the comics, TV shows and movies I consumed with my family as a kid. So we referenced classic anime, manga and illustration to evoke that nostalgia in a way I hope feels fresh and relatable.

"But I also needed the audience to connect emotionally," he says, referring in particular to Sato and kaiju Emi's bond, which is central to the film. "We explore the harder lessons in life, so the world needs to be believable. To marry story and tone, we worked really hard to represent the specificity of Tokyo, and to make sure the cinematography felt very grounded. So even though our look is quite stylised, I hope it still feels relatable."

Tindle says he hopes audiences fall in love with Emi, just like he did conceptualising her nearly 25 years ago. "She's got a touch of *Looney Tunes*, a smidge of '70s Japanese kids shows, and a lot of my daughter when she was a toddler," he says of his inspirations. "One of the greatest rewards from early screenings has been watching how people connect with Emi on a personal level. That's an incredible feeling."

Tindle says he's also excited for audiences to experience an Ultraman untethered from the constraints of prior storytelling. "I didn't want the mythology to be a barrier to entry for those who may not be familiar with the character," he explains.

As such, he started afresh, depicting Sato as a character who straddles two cultures, has unresolved issues with his estranged father and finds his own path through atypical parenting. "Ken needed to be relatable. He needed to be flawed. He needed to share the conflicts we all face: work, family, ego," Tindle details. "The mythology of Ultraman became a vehicle for that story. Ultraman has always been an aspirational character, so he became a metaphor for parenting, an aspiration to put one's self aside to help others. For me, that's a continuation of Ultraman's ideals and an evolution toward a more relatable hero."

Ultraman: Rising is on Netflix from 24 June.

SCI-FACT! **Gedde Watanabe, known for his roles in *Sixteen Candles* and *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*, voices Ken's father, Professor Sato.**

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Paint It Black

The *Orphan Black* story continues with **Echoes**, a new series set 30 years after the original

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

Amanda Fix as Jules gets herself into the spotlight.

THERE AREN'T MANY TV SHOWS that can boast a following so great that its fans even have a name. Clone Club has been the label for devotees of cult Canadian drama *Orphan Black* since it made its small screen debut in 2013. The series – about a human clone by the name of Sarah Manning – hoovered up a host of awards during its original five-season, 50-episode run, including a Primetime Emmy and a Peabody.

Now, seven years after that final episode, comes *Orphan Black: Echoes*, a sequel that, while it's a distinct series in its own right, also promises to feel comfortingly familiar to old-time Clone Clubbers.

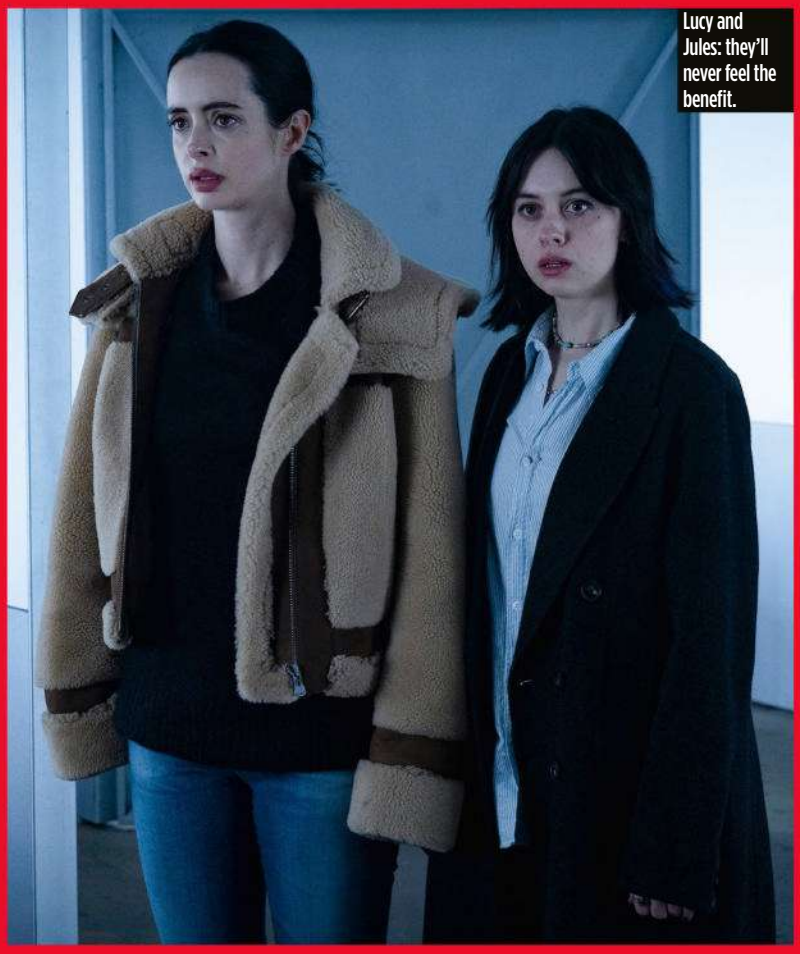
"We wanted to give the fans of the original show something to sink their teeth into," *Echoes* showrunner Anna Fishko – a former writer and producer on *Fear The Walking Dead* – tells Red Alert, "so we're using some of the characters from the original. We talked a lot about which characters the Clone Club had really latched on to and felt strongly about, and that was very informative in terms of how I shaped the story. At the same time I also wanted people who hadn't watched all five seasons of the original show not to be lost in the weeds."

Certainly, there are characters that fans of the original show will recognise in *Echoes* – among them Jordan Gavaris as Felix Dawkins (though aged up 30 years) and Evelyne Brochu as Dr Delphine Cormier. But the central focus of the new series is Krysten Ritter's Lucy, a thirtysomething woman who discovers that she's a synthetic, a "print-out"" based on a real human being, but sharing none of that original person's memories.

While Fishko is keen for *Echoes* to feel part of the larger *Orphan Black* story, she says she didn't feel beholden to the style and pace of the 2013-2017 series.

"I wanted to make sure it felt like contemporary television," she says regarding the stylistic differences between *Echoes* and the original. "Part of that was choosing a slightly different visual style and a slightly slower kind of storytelling. The original show moves like a freight train all the time, and that

Jules with "print-out" Krysten Ritter as Lucy (right).


Lucy and Jules: they'll never feel the benefit.

Xander (Vinson Tran) can't find the light switch.

Kira Manning's not much better at it, either.

felt part and parcel of the time in which it was made. We had more leeway, I think, to spend a little bit more time with the characters and dive a little bit deeper into some of the big questions that the show asks."

Beyond the fact that Sarah Manning is gone, the biggest difference between the original series and *Echoes* is that this is set 30 years into the future, meaning advancements not just in the cloning technology, but also in the larger *Orphan Black* world.

"We wanted a near-future environment so that we weren't dealing with everything being wildly different," the writer says. "I'm always more engaged by sci-fi when it's not so hard as a viewer to place yourself in that world, where it feels familiar enough."

What Fishko found especially fascinating, she tells us, is the research she undertook in preparation for the series. She reveals she knew "a little" about tissue printing before she started work on *Echoes*, but what she uncovered about the subject as she got deeper into the project shocked her, in terms of how close we really are to the science laid out in *Orphan Black*.

> **"We wanted to give the fans of the original show something to sink their teeth into"**

Kira Manning (Keeley Hawes) has a chat with Lucy.

"We were put in contact with a tissue printing expert who runs a lab at [research university] Johns Hopkins," she says, "And he said, 'All of these things that you're playing with are not that far off.' Right now, they're printing an amazing variety of things – little tiny hearts that beat, brain tissue and cartilage and skin tissue for burn victims.

"I mean, we thought we were going to get on the phone with this professor, and he was going to be like, 'That would never work, that would never happen,' but instead he was so thrilled. It made us feel better about the way we were approaching the story."

Fishko hopes that *Echoes* has a long future on AMC, and says she has Lucy's arc "pretty much mapped out". As for a second season, "we're starting to get all of the pieces in place to start moving forward," she tells us.

"I was very lucky to work with a lot of really lovely people on this show," she smiles, "and it would be such a pleasure to come back together – it's always fun to go back to camp for another summer!"

Orphan Black is on ITV X from 16 May.

SCI-FACT! Krysten Ritter is also a published author. Her debut novel, a psychological thriller titled *Bonfire*, came out in 2017.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Brave New Worlds

IDW is having a Pride party with the first **Star Trek: Celebrations** anthology

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Celebrations cover art, by Paulina Ganucheau.

WITH WRITER STEVE ORLANDO describing it as "the franchise pointing us towards a better, more equitable future," *Star Trek* has always embraced diversity in all its various iterations, going back to Gene Roddenberry's original '60s television series. Now, in time for Pride Month, IDW is publishing a new one-shot that commemorates many of its numerous LGBTQ+ characters, ranging from John Cho's Sulu to *Lower Decks*' Beckett and Jen.

"I couldn't be luckier!" says Orlando, who is teaming up with artist Lauren Knight. "Working with Sulu and his family in the Kelvin timeline offered a unique opportunity, because not too much had been done with them with *Star Trek Beyond* being the most recent theatrical release.

"We were able to create a story that honours Sulu and his family while also bringing some classic aspects of the character into the Kelvin timeline for the first time, so we'll see Sulu, [husband] Ben and [daughter] Demora just after *Beyond*."

Revealing that "we'll also have Kelvin Sulu swordfighting in a nod to 'The Naked Time'", Orlando says that he is packing a considerable amount into the story's compact length. "This is an action story, even if it's a short one," he continues. "A high-action adventure with a queer hero proudly in

Lower Decks' Jen and Beckett hit Little Risa.

The Kelvin Universe Sulu fights for his family.

> **Star Trek has been one of the few series that highlights relatable queer representation**

the lead. He's a hero who has sworn to return home to his family but the key here for this short is that for Sulu, the family is his husband and his daughter. For this story, a queer family gets centred in a way they're not often allowed to. Here, Sulu's family has full equality in a narrative sense, and that's an equality and equity that queer families have long been denied in storytelling."

Harking back to *Picard*'s third season, writer Vita Ayala and artist Liana Kangas, meanwhile, are exploring Seven of Nine and Raffi Musiker's burgeoning relationship. "*Picard* was my first introduction to *Star Trek*, along with *Lower Decks*, to work my way back through the *Star Trek* lore and I really fell in love with those characters, especially Raffi," says Kangas.

"We really wanted to do them justice, and in the most authentic way, so both Vita and I read [Kirsten Beyer and Mike Johnson's *Picard* novel] *No Man's Land* and I rewatched all of *Picard* since I was so pumped to dive into this. I think Vita writes an incredibly relatable story of real-life scenarios that queer and LGBTQ+ individuals experience in the real world.

"*Star Trek* has been one of the few series that highlights relatable queer representation, offering stories that have resonated deeply with me. Working on this project allows me to give a lot of myself while getting to celebrate that with such a vast community of fans who seek the same connection I did."

A relative newcomer to *Star Trek*, Hannah Rose May is focusing on *Lower Decks* couple Jennifer Sh'reyan and Beckett Mariner. "I've always been aware of the various series and movies but it wasn't until *Lower Decks* that I truly discovered my passion for all things *Star Trek*," says May, who is paired with artist Jack Lawrence. "What I love about *Lower Decks* is how it continues the *Star Trek* tradition of creating space for diverse characters and stories, and that's why I leapt at the opportunity to be part of this anthology."

May's story follows on from "Envoys" – the second episode of the first season of *Lower Decks* – which saw Mariner and Jen sent on a mission to Little Risa. "I found out that Risa has been a location that's cropped up across *Star Trek* series for decades for its reputation as a pleasure planet," continues May. "When I started drafting out ideas for my story, I knew I wanted to set it against the backdrop of Risa."

Joking that "Who doesn't want to see the crew of the USS Cerritos in spring break mode?" May explains that the story sees Mariner and Jen taking some precious personal time. "We're with Mariner as she heads down to the surface of Risa for a little day-date action with Jennifer early on in their relationship," continues May.

"I wanted to play with that emotion of going on a group trip with friends, but what you really want to do is spend time with that one person you've got a crush on. I felt like that would be such a fun situation to put Mariner into, especially knowing that she's constantly finding ways to cover her emotions."

Star Trek: Celebrations issue one is out on 29 May.

SCI-FACT! ***Celebrations*** **also features stories about** ***Strange New Worlds'*** **Christine Chapel and** ***Discovery's*** **Tig and Stamets.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Atlas Smith And J-Lo

Atlas director Brad Peyton on his intergalactic AI actioner

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

BRAD PEYTON IS NO STRANGER to pushing the boundaries of reality. Consider his three films with Dwayne Johnson: *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island*, *San Andreas* and *Rampage* – each one a bombastic slice of pulpy cinema. Now Peyton returns with *Atlas*, the story of a data analyst (Jennifer Lopez) stranded on a dangerous planet after pursuing Harlan (Simu Liu), a villainous artificial intelligence terrorist.

"My taste is always to do as much as I can," the filmmaker tells Red Alert. "I want to push everything as much as possible."

We're discussing how he designed the colourful planet that Lopez's eponymous character Atlas Shepherd cannot escape, and how he wanted to avoid creating another Tatooine. "When I first came to Netflix and pitched this idea, they were like, 'Well, what's the overall terrain of the planet?' I was like, it's everything. We're going to do everything."

The planet became a colourful, characterful landscape featuring forest, snow and desert climates, each serving up different traps for Atlas to conquer while driving her newly acquired mech suit. The film ends up acting as an intergalactic riff on Tom Hanks's *Cast Away*, except that rather than having a volleyball to keep her company, Atlas's high-tech suit comes fitted with an AI named Smith. Atlas, however, has a deep distrust of AI, especially as her mission – and the reason she's many moons away from Earth – is to hunt down a different AI hellbent on destroying mankind.

"My approach to AI was nuanced," Peyton says. "What you've seen in a lot of cinema is very black and white: AI is good or AI is bad. Right now, the view is that AI is bad, and I get that. But what I think is a more realistic conversation is: how do you interact with AI? We already interact with it every day, and we love it. It's in our phones. To say it's all good or all bad is like saying, 'All people are all good or all bad.' I wanted to do something different to those other science fiction films."

As a result, the film views AI as neither Terminator nor WALL-E, with Peyton instead delivering an outlook on the future that considers both sides. In part his approach came from conversations with futurists, experts in predicting the future by analysing the present. "Their outlook on the world is a more optimistic one, but it was also in the way [of our film]," he says. "It was a delicate balance of trying to do something that's never been done before on screen and being realistic."

Sterling K Brown as Colonel Banks: very cross.

Jennifer Lopez as Atlas in the physical mech prop.

Director Brad Peyton with Lopez (and Abraham Popoola's head).

> **What you've seen in a lot of cinema is very black and white: AI is good or AI is bad**

In designing the world of *Atlas*, Peyton stayed grounded when putting together the mech suits but skipped the details when it came to how mankind developed intergalactic travel ("If I got into how it works, the movie was going to be an extra 20 minutes long," he adds). More emphasis was put on developing the relationship between Atlas and Smith as they traverse a treacherous landscape.

Lopez, for her part, spent almost a month acting in her suit's cockpit, which sat on a gimbal surrounded by greenscreen. She then had to react to her fictional surroundings as four cameras captured the details of her performance. "Her background as a dancer, singer, and solo performer helped as she used all of those muscles to feel comfortable in a space where a lot of actors would be super uncomfortable," Peyton says. Lopez wasn't completely alone, though. The actor Gregory James Cohan was brought in to temporarily voice Smith, giving Lopez someone to bounce off. However, he ended up being so effective that Peyton decided to cast Cohan as the final voice of Smith.

"She was having a live conversation with Greg who's in a booth on the soundstage next to me," Peyton says. "Sometimes I would just say, 'On this one, Greg, I want you to pause and see what she does.' Her relationship with Smith became this really organic thing."

Now, having crafted such a rich world, Peyton's ready to explore more in the *Atlas* universe. "If you love what you do, and you're a creative person, it's hard not to fall in love with a world you create and go, 'Wow, I could do so much with this,'" he says. "For me, I've just scratched the surface of what exists. I have a really exciting idea that expands Jennifer's character a lot and brings a new supporting cast into the world. As soon as I was done, I was like, 'I need to write this idea down.'"

This may be Atlas's first adventure, then, but it might not be her last.

Atlas is on Netflix from 24 May.

SCI-FACT! **Peyton was inspired by James Cameron, *Forbidden Planet*, *Return Of The Jedi* and the game *Titanfall*.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- **Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters** gets a second season, with more Monsterverse TV spin-offs on the way.
- Sandra Yi Sencindiver joining Noah Hawley's **Alien** series.
- **Fallout** renewed for a second season on Prime Video.
- Tim Kring developing **Heroes: Eclipsed**, a sequel to the '00s superhero series.
- Phasers to kill: **Star Trek: Lower Decks** to end with season five.
- Phasers to renew: **Star Trek: Strange New Worlds** gets a fourth season.
- Steve Buscemi joining the cast of **Wednesday** season two.
- **The Witcher** to end after five seasons.
- **For All Mankind** earns a fifth season renewal, with Soviet-themed spin-off *Star City* also in development.
- Animated comedy series **Golden Axe** adapting the Sega videogame classic.
- Peter Claffey and Dexter Sol Ansell to star in *Game Of Thrones* prequel **A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms: The Hedge Knight**.
- **Quantum Leap** reboot cancelled after two seasons. Oh boy...

SCI-FACT! **There's a district attorney named after *SFX*'s very own Nick Setchfield in Millar and Hitch's *Ultimates* run.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Children Of The Evolution

Nu-heroes assemble in Marvel's brave new **Ultimates** universe

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

A special variant issue one cover, by InHyuk Lee.

WITH ITS REVISIONIST APPROACH, MARK Millar and Bryan Hitch's inaugural *Ultimates* proved highly influential when it debuted in 2002, establishing a template that was subsequently emulated by the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Now writer Deniz Camp and artist Juan Fregeri are taking a similarly radical approach as they revive the alternate Earth's Mightiest Heroes, promising an evolution of not only the Avengers themselves but all superhero team books.

"It's like the ultimate Ultimates," says Camp. "It's about the way the superhero team functions, the stakes of it, as there's something very dangerous about being a superhero in a world like this. The Ultimates will have to operate as a superhero resistance network rather than a traditional superhero team. There's no press conferences and government go-betweens, no top secret clearances and meetings with the President or testifying before Congress."

The writer is taking a lead from last year's Jonathan Hickman-scripted *Ultimate Invasion* miniseries and *Ultimate Universe* one-shot, which saw the Maker, aka a malevolent alternate Reed Richards, journeying to a new Ultimate universe and initially preventing the emergence of heroes like Spider-Man and Black Panther.

"These heroes are branded as terrorists, they're outlaws," he continues, "and the whole apparatus of control – the Maker's council and all their advanced weaponry and super-forces – are arrayed against them at all times, which means they're in constant danger. So keeping your secret identity secret is a life or death proposition."

With Camp promising an "ever-changing and evolving line-up that's going to change almost every issue", the Ultimates' opening ranks are very different to their various predecessors. "We start off with Iron Lad, Doom, Thor, Sif and Captain America and then add Giant-Man/Ant-Man and Wasp," says Camp.

"Iron Lad is a young Tony Stark, both more earnest and more idealistic than his 616 counterpart, and Doom is [another] Reed Richards after years of physical and psychological torture from the Maker," he continues. "Steve Rogers is Captain America and very much like the 616 Cap, but with the crucial difference that he's waking up in a world without the United States of America. Thor and Sif are gods who have nevertheless had something significant stolen from them and are a bit angrier for it. As for Hank and Janet, I don't want to give too much away because getting to know them is an important part of issue one."

Ultimates issue one picks up immediately after *Ultimate Universe*'s devastating conclusion. "Thousands are left dead, Stark Tower is destroyed and the Maker's council has made the world think they are responsible for the attack," teases Camp. "Each issue will be a complete done-in-one story, and most will introduce a new Ultimate version of a classic Marvel character."

Ultimates issue one is out on 5 June.

Megan Hutchison's manic artwork from issue one.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Demon Daze

Archie launches its first Premium Event as **Judgment Day** comes to Riverdale

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER PREVIOUSLY focusing on different aspects of its supernatural worlds in various one-shots and anthologies, Archie Comics is now unleashing its first summer crossover. Billed as the first Archie Premium Event, *Judgment Day* begins with Archie's hometown Riverdale literally descending into Hell.

"My prior work with Archie, *Archie Vs The World*, got rave reviews, but one persistent complaint we got was, 'Why isn't there more?'," says writer Aubrey Sitterson. "That led [senior director of editorial] Jamie Rotante back to me, and she wanted to push the Archie characters to their absolute breaking point with a concept so outrageous: Archie as a demon hunter!"

Although spookier stories such as *Judgment Day* are released under the Archie Horror imprint, Sitterson insists that Archie and his friends are essentially unchanged since the Riverdale High student first made his debut in December 1939's *Pep Comics* 22. "Our Archie is the same person fans have known and loved for nearly 85 years, and that goes for all the *Judgment Day* cast," he continues. "To me, that's the appeal of working with characters that have existed for so long with such well-defined personalities. What you'll see in *Judgment Day* is drastically different from anything else that's come before, but it's the result of choices that remain true to the character – albeit with the result of some unusual horrific circumstances."

"The archetypes are the same but they're more human and the circumstances are more dire," adds artist Megan Hutchison. "There are 'real world' consequences for their actions and that changes them. We delve into the deeper character flaws of the cast, and it's been fun to play with who everyone represents. Also, there's a lot of blood!"

While, as Sitterson notes, "there are certain characters such as Jughead, Reggie and Betty and Veronica that are a hard requirement for any *Archie* story," less well-known supporting characters such as Madam Satan, Pop from Pop's Chock'lit Shoppe and Archie's cousin Alistair Andrews also play a part in what unfolds. "It was a matter of figuring out what the story demanded," he explains. "And also doing our best to leave Easter eggs for long-time Archie fans."

"The core characters are there," adds Hutchison. "It's classic Archie to bring out the terror of the story but with a twist, and we also do a lot of horrible things to a lot of characters in the universe." According to Hutchison, "you're going to have a new perspective on Archie after reading this."

Judgment Day opens with Archie being confronted with corrupted and possessed versions of his nearest and dearest, although Sitterson refuses to reveal any further details. "I'm wary of giving away too much information about ramifications or where the series concludes, as unpacking it is meant to be a significant component of the overall experience – one that's as thoughtful and considered as the Archie Premium Event presentation," he says.

"Let's just say that any time Archie Comics wants to give us this level of freedom, letting us do what we've done on *Judgment Day* – that is, anything we want – I stand ready, willing and able."

Archie Comics: Judgment Day issue one is out on 22 May.

SCI-FACT! **The first Archie Horror series, *Afterlife With Archie*, was published in 2013.**

SCI-FACT! Nicolas Roeg's original picks to play Newton were Peter O'Toole and SF writer Michael Crichton.

PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

Alien Resurrection

The Man Who Fell To Earth makes a new landing on Radio Four

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"EVERYONE INVOLVED is a fan of the film," says director Simon Barnard of Radio Four's adaptation of *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. "Even though we're making something a bit different!"

First published in 1963, Walter Tevis's novel was brought to the screen by Nicolas Roeg a decade later, gifting David Bowie his ultimate film role as exiled extraterrestrial Thomas Jerome Newton.

"I read the book around a year ago and was struck by just how different it was to the film," says Barnard, whose Bafflegab Productions are behind such acclaimed audio dramas and documentaries as *Uncanny*, *The Battersea Poltergeist* and *Children Of The Stones*. "The film is very abstract and surreal and the last third of it is really strange, and nothing like the book. Newton's mission to Earth is explained a lot better in the novel."

Tevis set his alien visitation fable in the then distant 1980s. As Barnard tells Red Alert, this allows a 2024 production to take the historical perspective. "All this new technology Newton brings to Earth – now we can say he invented CDs and flatscreen TVs!

"There's also going to be quite a bit of 1980s news archive. Newton's coming to save the planet because things are going horribly wrong. Tevis didn't know this when he was writing the book, but it's set in the first half of the 1980s, which is exactly when this stuff did actually happen. You've got the height of the Cold War and at the same time the world's waking up to the greenhouse effect and global warming. So we've put a lot of that in there, which we can do with the benefit of hindsight."

Bowie, of course, casts a long, thin and indelibly otherworldly shadow as the Man himself. *Star Trek: Picard*'s Harry Treadaway plays Newton in the radio version. "We weren't trying to replicate Bowie," Barnard insists. "Newton's described as being fragile, like a bird. We needed someone with that kind of sensitivity. I'd seen Harry in *Penny Dreadful* and his performance as Frankenstein really stuck with me. Basically I asked him to do that performance, but subtract the egomania and arrogance."

> **"It's about someone who's far from home and lost"**

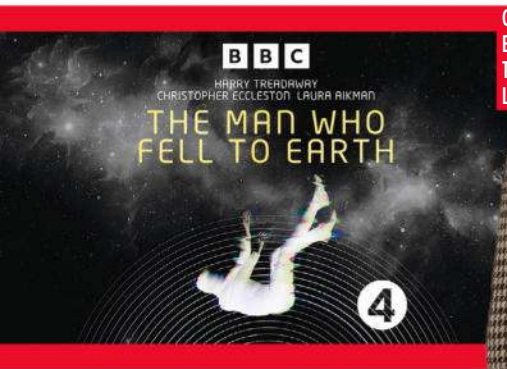
Laura Aikman is Betty-Jo, an alcoholic who falls in love with the enigmatic inventor, while Christopher Eccleston is widowed scientist Nathan Bryce, initially suspicious but later an ally. "We wanted someone who'd give a bit more of a muscular performance. More of a formidable presence, like a force of nature, someone who would work well against this fragile alien guy."

The production is scored by electronic musician Gazelle Twin. "She's our secret weapon," enthuses Barnard. "She's been working on these very alien textures. It's going to sound pretty unusual for Radio Four, I think."

Why are we still drawn to this story? "It's about someone who's far from home and lost. Everyone's felt that at some point. It's alienation and loneliness. On top of that you've got the message about the end of the world and the environment and nuclear war. That's more relevant now than it was then, certainly in terms of the environment."

And there's one more timely resonance in this tale of a strange technocrat trying to shape the destiny of humanity: "Elon Musk is building space rockets!"

The Man Who Fell To Earth is on BBC Sounds.



Christopher Eccleston, Harry Treadaway and Laura Aikman.

The Doctor and Ruby in *Roblox*.

Alex Kingston is back – big time – as River Song.

Millie Gibson, Ncuti Gatwa and Varada Sethu.

New models from Character Options. Bombtastic!

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ The BBC have released a first look at Ncuti Gatwa and Millie Gibson alongside new companion Varada Sethu from a readthrough for season two of *Doctor Who*. Sethu, who previously appeared in *Andor*, said: "I feel like the luckiest person in the world. It is such an honour to be a part of the Whoniverse, and I'm so grateful to the whole *Doctor Who* family – because that is what they are – for welcoming me with open arms and making me feel so at home. I couldn't ask for a better team than Ncuti and Millie to be on this adventure with – this is *so* much fun!"

Showrunner, executive producer and writer Russell T Davies said: "I first worked with Varada on a BBC production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it's a joy to welcome her on board the TARDIS. Right now in the studio, shooting for 2025, we've got Ncuti, Millie and Varada fighting side by side – we need all three, because the stakes are higher than ever!"

◆ ***Doctor Who* has joined the world of *Roblox* as part of BBC Wonder Chase. Players can visit Deep Space Zone – an otherworldly planet where people will find Ncuti Gatwa's Fifteenth Doctor and Millie Gibson's Ruby Sunday as well as a mischievous Goblin. The experience is free on *Roblox*, and available on PC, mobile (iOS, Android), PlayStation and Xbox – in *Roblox*, simply search for BBC Wonder Chase.**

◆ Character Options has released a new online exclusive set of action figures. *Ruins Of Skaro* includes two Movellans and a Dalek with bombs.

◆ **A *Doctor Who* Prom has been announced to take place at the Royal Albert Hall in London on 26 August.**

◆ Three new novels featuring the Fifteenth Doctor and Ruby will be released simultaneously in hardback and audio. *Ruby Red* by Georgia Cook is out 13 June and is narrated by Millie Gibson. *Caged* by Una McCormack follows on 27 June, with *Eden Rebellion* by Abi Falase due on 24 November.

◆ **Big Finish has announced new releases for 2024. Alex Kingston returns as River Song in *The Worlds Of Doctor Who – The Death And Life Of River Song: Last Words*, releasing in August, with two further sets due in 2025. Kingston also returns as River Song in *The Ninth Doctor Adventures: Star-Crossed*, released this month.**

◆ Tom Price and Samuel Barnett star in *Torchwood: The Restoration Of Catherine*, due out in June.

◆ **David Bradley, Jemma Powell, Jamie Glover and Claudia Grant from *An Adventure In Space And Time* return in *The First Doctor Unbound* this September.**

◆ Colin Baker, Bonnie Langford and Nicola Bryant return in six-part, three-disc story *The Trials Of A Time Lord* due for release in August.

◆ ***Attitude* magazine's May/June issue is out now and features an interview and photoshoot with Ncuti Gatwa. Speaking about why the world needs the Doctor's kindness now more than ever, Gatwa told *Attitude*: "The Doctor is constantly fighting for every life, even his villains. He shows mercy and compassion to all because he understands that there's a need for everything, and that we need each other. It's really nice to have a show like *Doctor Who* running after all these years in this era that we are in now."**

◆ Master Replicas has announced new figurines of the First, Fourth and Fifteenth Doctor's TARDIS.

◆ **Paul Forman will guest star in "Rogue", playing Lord Barton. Also confirmed to appear in an upcoming episode is Tom Rhys Harries.**

Doctor Who is on BBC One, iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).

NCUTI GATWA PHOTOGRAPHED BY MELANIE LEHMANN FOR *ATTITUDE*

SCI-FACT! **Varada Sethu also appeared in 2022's *Jurassic World Dominion* as Shira.**

SCI-FACT! **Trina Robbins designed the iconic costume for comic book heroine Vampirella.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

Remembering two pioneers of SF and comics

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

TRINA ROBBINS 1938-2024

Immortalised in Joni Mitchell's 1970 song "Ladies Of The Canyon", writer and artist Trina Robbins bridged the countercultural worlds of rock and comics.

Born Trina Perlson in Brooklyn, New York, she was an active participant in SF fandom before becoming a key female voice in the underground press. Robbins co-produced *It Ain't Me Babe Comix*, the first comic book created entirely by women, and co-founded the Wimmen's Comix collective.

Mainstream work included stints writing for Marvel and Eclipse and drawing DC miniseries *The Legend Of Wonder Woman* in 1986. She returned to the Amazon princess for one-shot *Wonder Woman: The Once And Future Story* in 1998.

A scholar of comics history, Robbins championed female creators and characters in such books as *Women And The Comics* (1985) and *The Great Women Superheroes* (1996).

LIZ HAFALIA/THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE VIA GETTY

VERNOR VINGE 1944-2024

Author and academic Vernor Vinge brought a prophetic grasp of technology to his SF novels as he explored the future-shock potential of AI and the internet.

Born in Waukesha, Wisconsin, his first short story, "Apartness", was published in the June 1965 issue of *New Worlds*, followed by debut novel *Grimm's World* in 1971. Vinge pursued his writing career while teaching mathematics and computer science at San Diego State University. The 1981 novella *True Names* brought him to wider attention. A pioneering cyberspace tale, it's seen as an influence on William Gibson and Neal Stephenson.

His 1992 novel *A Fire Upon The Deep* envisioned a galaxy-wide version of the internet. It won Vinge a Hugo Award, as did novels *A Deepness In The Sky* (1999) and *Rainbows End* (2006), along with novellas *Fast Times At Fairmont High* (2001) and *The Cookie Monster* (2004).

CY TOWN 1931-2024

British actor who operated Daleks in every *Doctor Who* story between 1973 and 1988.

DAN GOOZEE 1943-2024

American poster artist known for *Moonraker* and *Clash Of The Titans*.

NEW AUTHOR

HELEN COMERFORD

MEET THE EX-STAGE MANAGER BEHIND YA SUPERHERO SATIRE *THE LOVE INTEREST*

RYAN HARDING (FROND STUDIO)

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Jenna Ray is a 17-year-old wild swimmer, from the coastal town of Nine Trees, with a bit of a hero complex. After running into a burning building to save someone, she's rescued by superhero Blaze and ends up cast as his Love Interest.

What sparked the idea?
→ At the time I was a happy singleton being bombarded by messages from pop culture/society in general that I should be in a relationship. I decided to write a tale of self-determination, and the superhero genre's "love interest" was the perfect trope to subvert.

Are you a big fan of superheroes?
→ I am! I grew up watching the *X-Men* cartoon every Saturday morning. I always loved Storm, because she was a powerful Black woman who could fly. I'm a big Marvel fan. Ms Marvel is my runaway favourite from the current MCU Phase.

How long did the book take to write?
→ It took four years, and evolved in three distinct stages (like a Pokémon). On Bath Spa's MA, I created the setting and characters. With my agent, I gave Jenna the agency she needed to come alive. Bloomsbury helped me polish it into its final form.

Any advice for budding authors?
→ Learn about story structure, even if it's just to know which rules you're breaking. I'm obsessed with the midpoint of my story – there needs to be something that the first half works up to and the second half responds to.

The Love Interest is out on 6 June.

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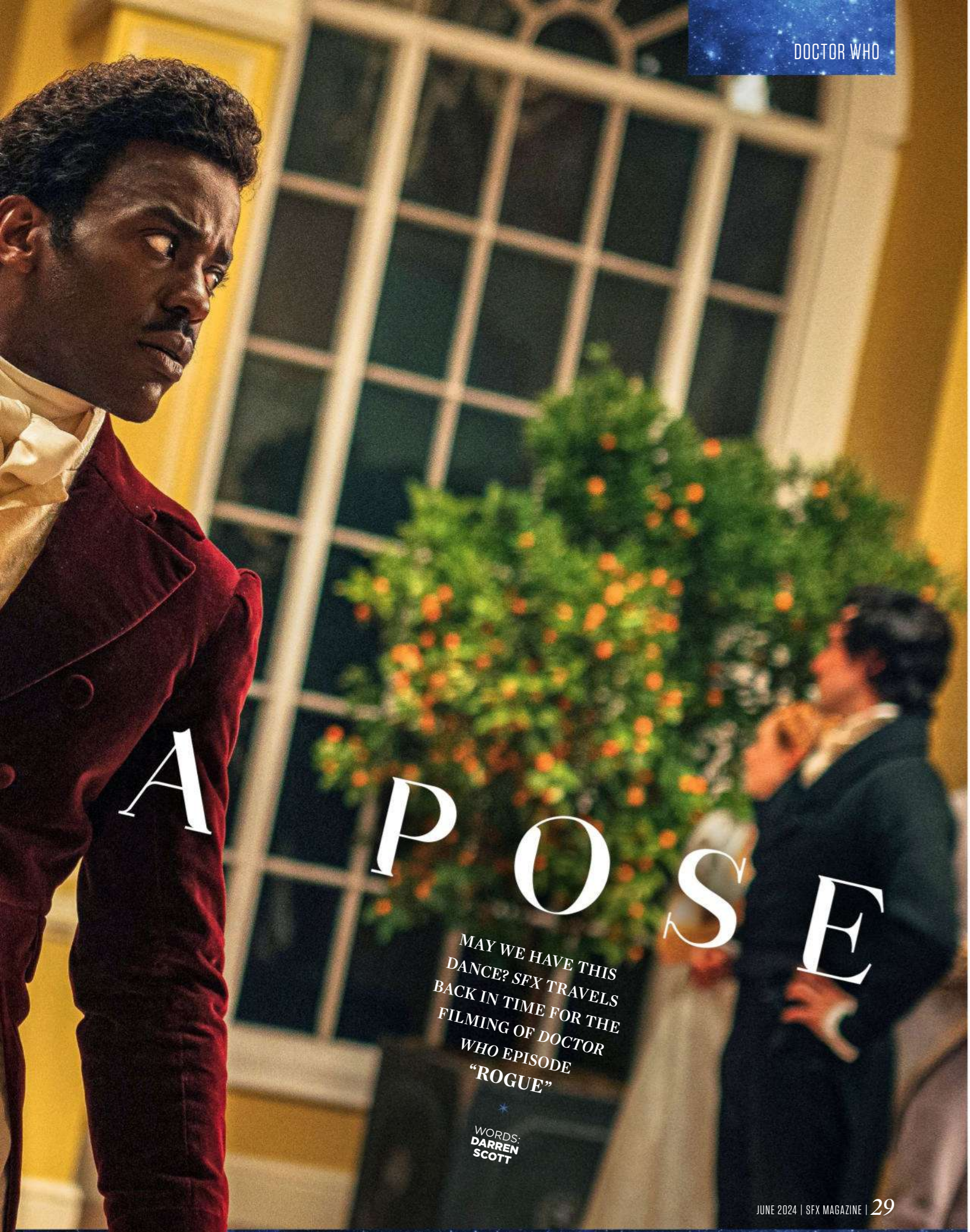


A POSE

MAY WE HAVE THIS DANCE? *SFX* TRAVELS BACK IN TIME FOR THE FILMING OF *DOCTOR WHO* EPISODE "ROGUE"

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

Millie Gibson as Ruby Sunday: la de dah.

WE'VE BEEN INVITED TO A BALL! Fancy being our guest?

It's 17 May 2023 and *SFX* is in South Wales – Margam Country Park, to be precise, around two miles from Port Talbot. If we turn around we can see the location used for Rattigan Academy in series four's "The Sontaran Stratagem" and "The Poison Sky", but today we're at the Orangery, where they've only gone and custom built a Regency ballroom inside.

What's particularly exciting is it's the first time press have been on set for the brand new global relaunch of *Doctor Who*. *SFX* is early, arriving in a park filled with trucks and lots of people in period costume outside drinking coffee. It's a beautiful, sunny day and already there's plenty of fans being wafted.

The scale is evident – unit base is about a mile away from location, but Margam Park is a hive of activity. The Orangery – a long white building – is split into two halves. The first has all the behind-the-scenes and production going on, while the second has the transformed filming space. There are boxes *filled* with candles, which members of production are shaving and shaping.

We spy cast members Ncuti Gatwa and Jonathan Groff, in full Regency regalia, outside having a crafty cuppa. They step back inside and Gatwa is slipped back into a well-fitting velvet jacket and taken back to set, a newly constructed balcony overlooking the ballroom.

Groff's titular character Rogue has an American accent as he and the Doctor exchange stilted greetings when rehearsing a scene. "I think you and I should go outside," he tells the Time Lord.

"Fast mover!" Gatwa replies in a Scottish accent, prompting lots of laughs from the crew. Someone steps in to apply a make-up brush to Groff.

Behind us, the extras start filing in – they're in period dress but have modern day jackets and backpacks, and are glued to mobile phones they've previously been using to take photos of one another next to the ruins outside. A clapper board comes into shot – 333 take one – and Rogue stands, looking out over the balcony, hand on hip. The Doctor walks in – you can hear his heels on the floor.

"Brooding. Good look. Do you practise in a mirror? Bit more frown, maybe. Like this, yeah? Really, like this." He pulls a face.

"I didn't know the Duchess employed a court jester," Rogue replies.

"Well, I'm hilarious. And you are... funny peculiar."

The scene is repeated several times, with additional dialogue, and what's interesting is how many nuances Gatwa brings to the delivery. One line in particular sums up his new Doctor: "Honey, I'm here for fun."

Production crew are beavering around, candles are being lit. "Mind your armpit," someone says.

"Hubble, bubble, toil and trouble!" Gatwa jokes, winking to camera. Groff has his hair touched up, Gatwa is joking around. Groff does a shimmy. "Jamie's coming up so someone's

Ncuti Gatwa with Jonathan Groff as Rogue.

> **“People can’t watch it and go, ‘Not as good as that other period drama I’ve seen’”**

done something terribly wrong!” Gatwa hoots, the crew laughing along.

Another scene is shot, with Rogue looking out over the balcony. Groff gives options of leaning forward or standing back. They opt for forward. Later the scene is filmed again from Gatwa’s angle. “I want to do sultry,” he says, grabbing his lapels.

We see another shot being captured – a close up of a ring in Rogue’s hand... But before we can probe further, that’s lunch – and we’re off to interview people in the gardens.

PRODUCTION VALUES

Producers Phil Collinson and Chris May are loving what the camera is capturing. They describe Gatwa as “amazing” and “awesome”. “It feels like we’ve got lightning,” Collinson says. “He’s everything you want in a Doctor Who, he’s just full of energy but incredibly soulful. I think he’s very special.”

While Collinson has worked on *Gentleman Jack*, this is May’s first dabble with period drama. “I think my first conversation was, can we go somewhere where there’s a ballroom?” he recalls. “I think we all frantically watched a bit of *Bridgerton* and thought, ‘Okay, well, where did they go?’”

Collinson nods. “It’s a really hard location to find.”

May continues. “It actually worked out completely brilliantly, because we found a location that we’ve basically built a set inside. As you can see, we’ve put a floor in, we’ve repainted, we’ve built a balcony, we’ve dressed it, but actually, what it’s given us is the ability to work both inside and then also we’ve got this really lovely exterior, which, when practically you’re shooting an episode that takes place entirely at night, it just means that we can jump in between the two with ease.”

He explains that when they first visited the location two months previously, it was “cold and wintry”, but when they arrived on the first day of filming all the tulips and alliums had bloomed. “We’ve ended up with a place that’s given us a massive amount of really lovely production value and the art department have just worked an absolute wonder, really. We’ve thrown in several kitchen sinks, it’s been good.”

“Making every episode is dazzling and different from the previous one and the big star of this episode *is* the set and then the costumes and wigs,” Collinson explains. “People can’t watch it and go, ‘Not as good as that other period drama I’ve seen’ – it’s got to be a great period drama. So we’ve pulled it off, I hope.”

May smiles. “There’s been material that you’ve shot and you’re just like, ‘Oh yeah, when people see that, people are going to *remember*.’ It feels like an honour. First season with Ncuti, who’s going to be incredible and it’s just *so* exciting.”

Every good ballroom requires dancing, and “Rogue”’s is no exception.

Collinson laughs. “We said, ‘Bring us the man who choreographed *Bridgerton*!’ and they did!” Jack Murphy, the choreographer and movement director of *Bridgerton*, is responsible for a lot of dancing in this series of *Who*. The trickiest part of this particular

Continued on page 34...

RUBY READ

Producer Phil Collinson on Millie Gibson as Ruby Sunday

She’s gorgeous. She embodies the best of everything you want in a companion. She’s feisty. She’s got this big emotional backstory which has called on her [for] some big old acting scenes – she’s just amazing for such a young actor. She’s amazing because she can do funny, she’s spunky and full of adventure and then she can break your heart as well. So we’re really chuffed, and the chemistry between them is great.

The best Doctor/companion relationships are when they look like they’re having fun together as well as facing down these terrible enemies and the end of the world every week. When they’re doing that, they’ve also got to look like they’re having fun, and they just *do*. They make you smile and there’s something so youthful about the two of them, and so energetic, and it’s a great combination for a brand new series.

PICTURES: JAMES PARDON, RAY BURNISTON © BBC STUDIOS

ROGUE TRADER

JONATHAN GROFF HAS GOT THE GOODS

How are you finding being part of a British institution?

◆ Oh my gosh, it's totally surreal and incredible. I had heard of *Doctor Who*, I knew what it was before Russell asked me to do it, but I hadn't seen an episode.

So he sent me six: the first one from 1963 and then several throughout the years to get educated on the institution of *Doctor Who*. So now that I've been fully educated, it means even more.

We're going to need to know which episodes he sent you...

◆ I can't tell you. He sent me that first one. But I don't want to blow up his spot.

So what did you think of "An Unearthly Child"?

◆ I loved it. Knowing what Ncuti is bringing to this institution and his energy and who he is as a person, and who Russell is, and who Russell has represented to me as a young gay actor through the years – even in that first episode in 1963, there was something that felt alternative about it to me.

There was even something that felt queer about it to me. When the teachers come inside the ship, they can't understand how something so small that they walk into is so expansive. The Doctor explains how it's hard, it takes time to understand things that you don't immediately know. To me, there was such an alternative energy even in that. That idea that you can look at things from different angles and what you expect things to be always are not. It felt beautifully Other, even from that first episode, which kind of made me a little emotional even watching it.

I was surprised in the other five episodes, how much I was crying, watching *Doctor Who*. I thought it was a sci-fi show, which of course it is, but I didn't anticipate how human and moving it also is. So that was a real treat to come to learn.

What can you tell us about your character?

◆ I can't tell you anything about Rogue. But I can tell you that working with Ncuti is incredible. There's just that quality of *it* that people talk about, like somebody has *it*, the it factor. He has it in spades in a totally unique way to him that is so special.

He's so extraordinary and so himself and getting to play with him – I'm halfway through my second week so I'm about halfway through shooting this episode – and he's just so present and so alive, and so charismatic, and I never know what to expect. So it feels special to act opposite him because he's a very special person, a very special entity and he's got this presence and aliveness that you can't teach, you just sort of have it or you don't and he totally has it effortlessly. It's amazing to act with him.

I've never shot anything ever in the UK. I played King George III in *Hamilton* on Broadway, but I've never done this sort of period drama dress before like this. It feels like I'm living my Carey Mulligan fantasy right now.

That look can't be anything but trouble, surely...

> **That's the whole thing with Regency, isn't it? It's that repressed excitement**

How did you find the dancing?

◆ I've always wanted to be a dancer. In our first session, I got emotional dancing. Because doing this kind of period dance is more about the social interpersonal interaction than it is about executing moves. So the articulation of the choreography, for me, is quite intimate and quite confronting, because it's not for show, it's for communication. It was really way more emotional and intense than I was anticipating thinking, "I'm coming to learn a Regency dance".

What was your reaction when you read the script?

◆ It said a lot to me that when I read the script, I hadn't yet seen an episode of the show and the script really grabbed me, really grabbed my heart. I was quite breathless reading it. To have whole decades of story behind this one particular script that I'm reading, that I'm completely ignorant about, and just to read this one script and have it affect me in such a deep way, further magnified the fact that I had to do it.

Did you feel there was an Otherness to it?

◆ Yes, there's many surprises. And it's unique. It's unique. It was unlike anything I'd read. Or seen. That's the whole thing with Regency, isn't it? It's that repressed excitement...

From scenes we saw, Rogue seems very enigmatic with quiet menace. What's going on?

◆ It was fun to play today, because we shot something yesterday that's deeper into the episode that was more expressive of what's under these layers.

So to put the top back on it and do the scene today was its own unique challenge, to sort of repress the information that we got yesterday from shooting what we did yesterday.

> I'm gonna be honest with you. I had an out of body experience, it was something unreal

Be careful, the owls are not what they seem.

Continued from page 31...

episode, he says, is to "give respect to *Bridgerton*. It is and it isn't *Bridgerton*," he explains, "so the most tricky thing was to not mimic *Bridgerton*."

There are 22 professional dancers, in addition to cast and supporting artists. For the leads, they have less time to perfect their moves than most.

"I get three one-hour sessions with the actors – they'd like me to have three times three hours! With the dancers, I get two days with them. So they learn the choreography and also actually they learn all about that scene. Because there's no point just plonking them in, they have to understand the whole context. I'd love more time, but I know the reality of it. It's a village, it's not just about the dancing. That's why I choose the choreography that I feel actors can manage.

"We have three dances – an establishing dance, a dance that brings joy, [and] a dance that is incredibly dramatic." He says they're "connected very much to the narrative of the piece, the scene, the episode and indeed the overall arc of the whole raison d'être for why we have this new Doctor."

Murphy says he was anxious seeing the routines being filmed. "They're dancing my creation. It says on the page, 'they dance'. It doesn't say what they dance, I say what they dance. So I'm like another writer and I have to get it right.

"It is really frightening because I do feel strangely, even though it's social dance, I keep thinking, because of the world of *Strictly*, I'm gonna get judged. But I've got to a place now, thanks to the quantity of dancing through *Bridgerton*, I can think, 'It's authentic. It is what it is. It's social dance.'

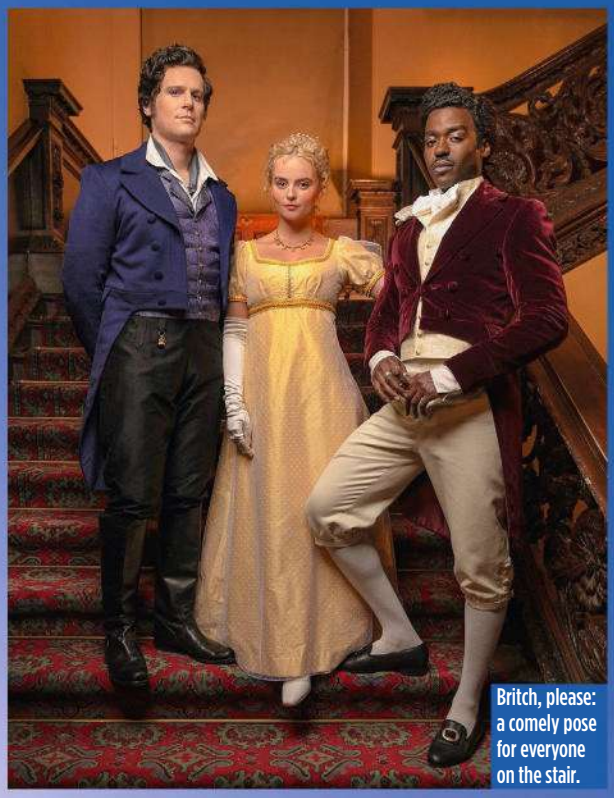
He's full of praise for what the team are bringing to the screen.

"Yesterday was, without doubt, one of the most thrilling, exciting days of my 35 year career," Murphy states. "One, because I'm choreographing for Russell. I feel deeply honoured to choreograph for, in my opinion, the greatest writer on British TV without a shadow of a doubt.

"The situation that he's written, and the cast who applied themselves to what we did yesterday, the music... it was just this marriage of departments coming together in such a way – but I will say to the why is because it was deeply personal. Deeply, deeply personal. It gave me, on a very personal note, a sense of authenticity I've never experienced before. Yes, that's loaded, because that's something I can't tell you. You'll have to wait to see.

"But I did work with somebody who I think is one of the most mercurial artists I've ever worked with – and I've been blessed. But yesterday I had an out of body experience. I know that's naff, for *Doctor Who*, but it's true. I'm gonna be honest with you. I had an out of body experience, it was something unreal. Something unreal happened."

May agrees. "It's been a really great experience. This is the first time I've ever really



Britch, please: a comely pose for everyone on the stair.

done anything with a lot of dancing, actually. It's been really challenging, but one of those things that is incredibly rewarding when it happens. Because [it's] meticulous planning and all the rehearsing, and then it all comes together and you just watch it on the monitor and you're just like, 'Oh my god.'"

Collinson laughs. "This is the third time I've done it – the first time was on *Gentleman Jack*, we got the choreographer and I thought, 'Oh my god, this is so *expensive*. How much rehearsal?' Then of course, you turn up on the day, and they go, 'Right, take one' and everyone goes [motions dancing] and off they whirl. And you realise it's worth *all* that, because then you just stand back and let it happen."

May nods. "It was beautiful."

BUILD HIGH FOR HAPPINESS

We can hear period music in the distance, which means the ballroom beckons. The supporting artists have taken to the floor, unclipping dresses from the back and letting trains run free. Each person has a cardboard tag on their wrist and is being positioned carefully by the production team. "Who am I chatting to?" one actor asks.

The set is huge – five violin players help to fill the space with music. At the far end, behind a glass door, is a lavish chaise longue.

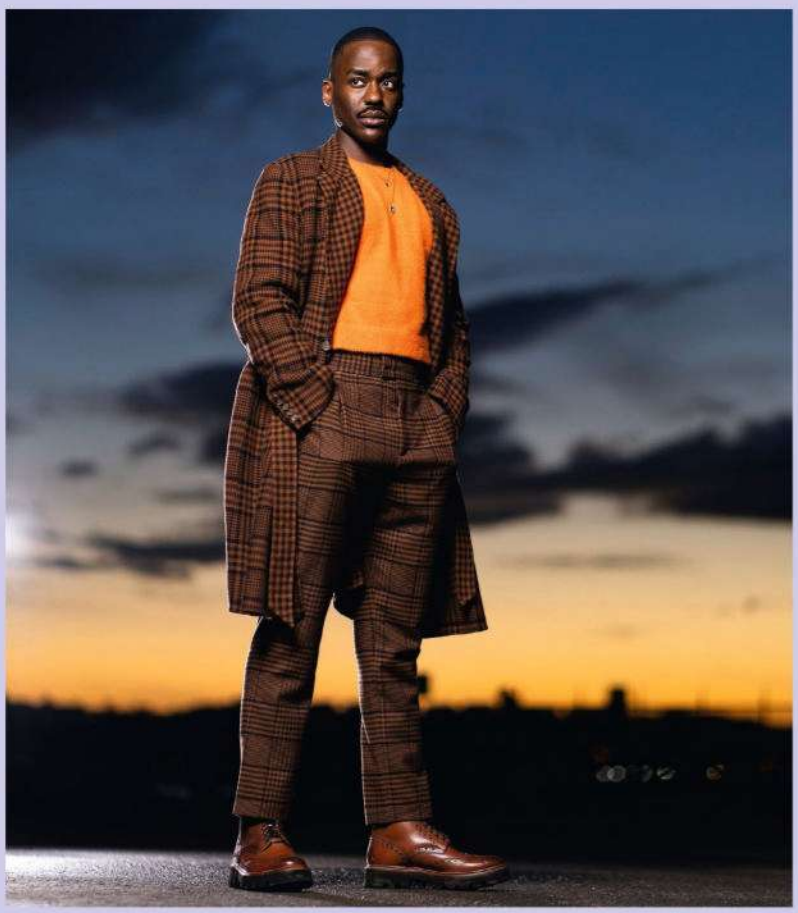
Millie Gibson comes over in her Regency dress and gives us a big embrace. "Sorry, I'm a hugger!" She almost loses her earring in the cuddle, but a continuity nightmare is saved by Jo, the PR.

"I think you came on the best episode, honestly it is *so* much fun," Gibson says,

Continued on page 40...

ORANGE YOU CLEVER

Costume designer Pam Downe on learning from the Doctor's new looks



When the first image of Ncuti in his orange sweater was released, there was a mad rush to buy them...

◆ I was warned, but it was a shock. I'll tell you why it was a shock, because we thought we'd have to buy another one and there weren't any left in the shop. Because we need the repeats. We bought two and then we suddenly thought, "Oh, we could do with a stunt double" and they were gone. So was the check coat. Most of the stuff is all made bespoke. But that one was bought, although we altered the trousers to be slightly different. That's the lesson that you learn: if you do that, it all gets bought. It's a real eye-opener. I had no idea that not only do they copy, they have to copy it immediately. They have to be the first ones to wear it all.

Is that something that you now take into consideration?

◆ Yes. When we did the specials with David [Tennant], I was warned by the person I bought the fabric from, "Buy all this fabric up because it will get bought up". So we did do! There wasn't much left. Then some of the Whovians tried to find out where it was woven and tried to get some made. It's charming.

Is it strange seeing your costumes worn before they're on screen?

◆ Yes, absolutely. They do such amazing copies as well, they're really serious about it. As I say, they're trying to get the absolute fabric, not just a copy of a fabric, its that they want *the* fabric. I think it's quite flattering.

Ncuti seems to be wearing a bit of orange this season...

◆ That wasn't intentional, no, although it's good on his skin. He is somebody who wears colour, strong colours. There's something liberating about that, putting that on screen because it's sometimes difficult to get those colours on people. But it wasn't intentional – I just found that jumper and quite liked it with those checks. I used it again, didn't I? Maybe there's something going on...

BEWARE THE DUCHESS!

INDIRA VARMA GOES BIG AS SHE RETURNS TO SCI-FI

How has your *Doctor Who* experience been so far?

◆ Oh, it's been *such* a laugh. I've wanted to do *Doctor Who* for ages. Not particularly because I was a massive fan as a kid. I was too scared of the Daleks, the usual kind of thing. But because so many friends have been in it and have said how much fun they've had. Because it feels like it's carte blanche to do whatever you want and it's so imaginative.

It's really fun to be part of *Doctor Who* also because I was working with David Tennant on *The Quatermass Experiment* when he found out he was going to be Doctor Who, then I was working with Matt Smith when *he* was going to be Doctor Who, and I'm like, surely it's my turn. I don't get to be Doctor Who but I get to play a character who aspires to be Doctor Who...

What can you tell us about The Duchess?

◆ She's a party animal. She is the Duchess of Pemberton and she is more than what she seems – or rather she becomes something else... I think the Duchess of Pemberton wants life to just be a game. I'm trying to be enigmatic!

She's great fun. As the Duchess of Pemberton, it's her party, it's her ball. She's *thrilled* with the newcomers who she doesn't know, and immediately she sees Millie and she wants to match her up with someone. It's all very sort of *Bridgerton*. It's very sort of... *camp*. Which is really [screams] FUN! It's so fun to be *extra*. I've always wanted to be in this era because I'm from Bath. I've been gutted that I've not been in any of the Jane Austens. So I get to do my Jane Austen villainess.

Did Russell ask you directly to be in this episode?

◆ Yes. He wrote me a lovely email and I was like, "Oh, yeah, I've got it. Oh, I should probably read it first before saying yes." But yeah, I really wanted to be part of it. Because I think he writes so brilliantly *for* actors, for the individuals. You can really hear Ncuti in his vernacular, in the Doctor's vernacular. I think he's really sensitive to that, and I think that's why they're all unique. I was thinking, it's kind of like *Hamlet* for kids. Not for kids, but you know what I mean? There's the idea that we can watch the Doctor again and again and again and it's different people's version of the Doctor, different flavour. I love that.

What did you think when you first got the script?

◆ Oh just *glee*, you just relish it. It's fun to be too big, never knowingly underacting –I think that's what I'm doing in this. Hopefully, there'll be a few people who just love her craziness. She is bonkers. People do love a villain.

How far can you go with *Doctor Who* in terms of making it big?

◆ I am slightly anxious that I'm overdoing it, to be honest. I like

"Awright duchess, how's it going?"

Ben [Chessell, director] very much and I'm hoping that he's going to choose the right stuff, so I don't look like an utter dick. But why not? I mean, if you can't be big in *Doctor Who*... Risk it. Be bad. Why not?

What do you think people will make of Ncuti's Doctor?

◆ It's just brilliant casting. I was already enamoured with him from *Sex Education*. He just *glows*, he exudes enthusiasm, but he's not just a bouncy, lovable guy. He's a *really* good actor. He's funny. He's playful, but he's also got soul. Also what I think Russell does so brilliantly is it's camp, it's funny, it's silly, but it's also got heart and I think he's brought it very, very much up to date, in ways that we can't necessarily go into. That's going to be really thrilling for the audience. Feels really modern, actually, despite this garment.

> **"She's a party animal. She is the Duchess of Pemberton and she is more than what she seems"**

Are you in many scenes with Jonathan Groff?

◆ Yes. Oh, he's a delight. He's glorious, he's brilliant. Huge fan of his work. And he's just gorgeous. He is that princely kind of gorgeous hunk of a male with the hair. I mean, he looks like an action figure, when it's all plastic, in that amazing wave. That's what he's like in real life.

Would you return to the Whoniverse?

◆ I'd totally come back again. Do you remember *Angels In America* when Meryl Streep played about four parts, didn't she? I'm not saying I'm Meryl Streep, but the idea that in *Doctor Who* you could just like, hey, wear another prosthetic something else. I'd happily come back.

HAIR WE GO!

CLAIRE WILLIAMS AND HER ARMY TURN BACK TIME

Is doing a period episode the biggest challenge of the series?

◆ This block is the biggest challenge, because we've got two episodes, both of them set in different periods. So they have to be historically accurate. But this is the biggest challenge, because we've got a lot of supporting cast with us who all have to look authentically turn of the century 1800s. So that has to be well planned and very well facilitated. The fact that we're having to put wigs on the two principal cast as well and that obviously has to look impeccable. It's very challenging, but fun.

How much research would go into an episode like this?

◆ A lot! I guess the same as any of our creative departments, because we want it to be authentic, and it needs to stand up. Just because it's *Doctor Who* it still has to stand up against all our period dramas, the quality has to be exemplary, it has to be faultless.

I do a lot of research, but obviously there's no photographs of the period. So all my research for their hairstyles and make-up looks has been done from portrait paintings from across Europe. There are some modifications, inasmuch as we don't have the authentic hair ornaments – they'd have all been pearls and silver and gold and diamonds. We've had to compromise a little bit – the budget doesn't stretch quite that far!

We have a responsibility with the drama to transport people to a different place in time. That's the whole premise of the series. So if we can make it look as authentic and as beautiful as possible, as magical as possible, it really helps the audience be there. So it's important.

How many people are extras on this episode?

◆ We've got about 78 background artists with us today. That's a lot of maintenance because we have to keep them looking like this all day. I'm very particular, I like every single background person to be able to take a close-up – if the camera lands on that person, they have to look immaculate.

> **"We've got over 30 hair and make-up artists working with us here"**

Everybody's been fitted. Every person in that room comes into us at the beginning and has a fitting. There are no wigs on any of the women, that is all their own hair. We've had to bring in daily teams from all over Britain. We've got over 30 hair and make-up artists working with us here and they've achieved these styles, especially on the ladies, from scratch. They're not wigs – it's important because everyone's got their hair up, so you need to see the hairline all the way

The Doctor turns on the charm with Rogue.

around, it needs to look like a natural hairline.

The crowd call is about two hours long to get everybody through. So one make-up artist doing about three people in that time, so it's a big effort for us to get this looking right and real.

That sounds like it has to be quite organised!

◆ Everybody has a fitting sheet that has all their information on; all the sideburns are numbered, all the hair pieces are numbered and catalogued. So when Person A comes in, they've got sideburns number 27 and wig number five, and they're all stored in a self-contained environment.

It's like a little conveyor belt. They arrive at the front desk, they get their wig, they get their fitting sheet, they go and sit with their make-up artist, the make-up artist does what's on the fitting sheet and off they go to set. And that happens every day.

What about wigs for men?

◆ Some of the men have wigs because now we're in a very contemporary period. Lots of people have skin fades where you can see the skin right up to a certain level. That's definitely not period – we have to really make sure that we're not bringing contemporary styling into this era. They've all got little glued-on sideburns. Ncuti of course himself is in a wig. He has to still look cool, and like the Doctor, but he still has to look right for the period.

You did the '60s episode as well, is that right?

◆ The '60s, believe it or not, is harder, because there's so much more photographic reference. People are much more critical of your work when they can look at authentic photographs.

A lot of the hairpieces and wigs that we're using in this episode will be set and adapted for the '60s episode. They're just styled differently – so we're doubling up on our facial hair pieces. Believe it or not, the '60s has sideburns as well but just styled slightly differently. So we try to work economically and efficiently.

Seeing everyone in the ballroom scene finally must feel good!

◆ I think it just [all] looks beautiful, I feel really, really proud of the show. I feel proud of my team. I feel that we've really achieved something today. It's been a long time in the planning, so it's been great.

More of Claire's period wigs in "The Devil's Chord".

NAILED IT!

Hair and make-up designer Claire Williams on the Doctor's Gallifreyan nail imagery

The symbols were changed every day. You don't have any continuity issues then, because if the symbol is always changing, it just looks like they're morphing scene by scene on his hands. So that every time you see them, the symbols have changed.

At first we were a bit worried that we were spelling something rude in Gallifreyan – that was a genuine concern. I remember Russell saying to me, "You don't realise how dedicated the Whovian fanbase is, they will try and read them. You've got to be very careful with these symbols." So we just adapted them. We took the basic design shapes and we adapted them so they are meaningless. If they do spell something, it's purely accidental.

Every day we just put a different set of symbols on him. So every scene it appears that the symbols have transformed, but it's shooting for hours, months and months and every day we just swapped the symbols.

Emily Beckett (Camilla Aiko) and Lord Barton (Paul Forman).

Continued from page 35....

clutching lip salve and her phone. Both Gatwa and Gibson will later say – at the world premiere for season one – that "Rogue" is their favourite episode of the run.

Rehearsals begin. "This is shocking, this is astonishing, this is... rather lovely," one of the characters says. The Doctor storms out and Rogue follows. "Oh we must play them..." says the mysterious onlooker. "Intercept them!"

Away from the intrigue, set designer Phil Sims explains that the room we're in ordinarily looks very little like this.

"Everything that you see in here has been added by us, apart from the end wall and the windows. The actual window frames, they're the location. We've put in all of the pilasters, the arches, the mouldings and detail.

"As we came back and looked at it, and went back to the studios and looked at it, we realised we needed to add a bit more to it, we needed to do something to that wall. So we thought, put a painting in there that's continuous, as if it's a sort of Tuscan frieze or something. Then we realised, really we need to frame it. So we needed to add arches, and we built out and added that side of the space.

> **"We've built a set within the location, and kept the best bits of the location"**

"Jamie, our DP, needed somewhere to hang lights – we wanted to hang a chandelier. So it made sense that we use trusses to bridge out across the space. But of course, that meant we needed to stand the truss to create a bridging structure across the whole space.

"At that point, we needed to just clad it and create the whole structure really within the space. So we've built a set within the location, and kept the best bits, the really expensive bits, of location. Actually, we took the central section of the window out and added our own door so that we can get in and out, which Ben [Chessell, director] insisted upon. I really didn't want to do it, but he made me do it," he jokes. "We needed to find a carpenter that was insured to do National Trust work! It's very good. It's worked out incredibly well."

If you think *this* is a lot of work, for a while it looked like they might have to build the entire thing from scratch.

"We got to a strange point in the process of trying to work out how best to approach it where Ben, Chris and I were talking about it and saying, 'Maybe this is a set? Maybe there's lots of gardens we can use, that we can make work for the exteriors and the night scenes,'" Sims recalls.

"But in the interior it's night, and we've got lots of days in it and there's a big dance number and all of that. So on paper, you look at that, you think, 'That's a set.' But you've got windows – what if we can create a connectivity between the gardens and the outside and the inside? That's amazing because on a set that's

really hard. As soon as you go outside, you're either into lots of greenscreen effects, or you've got to work really hard to create backgrounds and paintings that work and they often feel constricted and small and interior. So this, we get the best of both worlds.

"We didn't have space at the studio to build it, although we laid it out on a stage. So we'd have had to find a space to build the set if we were to build a set on its own. So all the planets aligned, really, and it made sense that we came to Margam, made the most of the beautiful architecture here – the windows, the expensive bits for us, the difficult things to build. It gave us a connectivity to the exterior, to a garden that's beautiful."

ALL OVER THE PLACE

It's also not the only place that creates the world of "Rogue" – the reality is something of a real-world jigsaw.

"We've got two exterior locations: this place and another place down the road," Sims explains. "So it's creating a connectivity between all of those places. One of them's a Restoration period, and this one's late Georgian, early Regency, so it's sort of perfect.

"The connectivity comes with our gardens and Tredegar House, which is our other interior location, for all the back-of-house corridors, the library. We've tried to connect with that upstairs, where you've got the dark wood, you've got the green, which we borrowed from Lee Court, which is another interior location we've got, which is where SPOILER ALERT! happens at the end of the show. We've *also* created the same floor detail that we have in Lee Court.

"So the idea is, as you watch the show, you just find the language and the language continues through the show, and it hopefully joins together visually so you're not aware of us jumping around frantically trying to film in different places!"

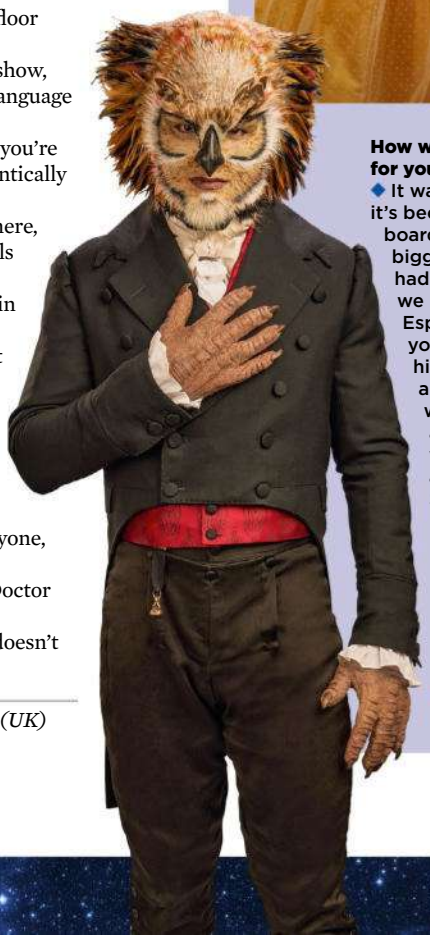
For the eagle-eyed viewers out there, Sims reveals that some of these walls and arches will be recycled into a famous building – more spoilers! – in another episode of the series.

"This has been one of our biggest builds and it's the most fun for me because it ties into the location beautifully. Hopefully lots of people will visit Margam in days to come when they think this is all here and it won't be!"

It's been a very busy day for everyone, least of all those dancing. But does choreographer Murphy think the Doctor has the moves?

"There isn't anyone on this that doesn't have the moves. Seriously."

Doctor Who is on BBC One, iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).



BRING IT TO THE BALL

Pam Downe on revisiting the Regency period

How was working on this episode for you?

◆ It was an undertaking. I mean, it's been very varied across the board. But this is one of the biggest because we haven't had these crowd numbers. And we made a lot as well. Especially for the principals, you can't just get that from a hire company to fit the body and get the right fabric. So we made a lot. So that was a challenge to the workshop, definitely. I have a workshop back at Wolf Studios, we made it all there. Most of the extra stuff we hire, but we alter and we trim, there's a lot of retrimming that goes on.

Has this been the most challenging episode of the season?

◆ I'm quite comfortable with doing period because I've done quite a bit of period. But it's very involved, it's a lot of work to do. But I know I can navigate my way through it, because I've done this period before. So that made it easier than it might have been if I hadn't. I'd already done a lot of research on other jobs that I've done with this period. So that's helpful.

There's a lot of supporting artists here. Did you have a different look for each one?

◆ Yeah, there's characters in amongst the supporting actually, there's smaller characters that have very distinctive looks. So it wasn't just knocking out one look for everybody, everybody had to be slightly different. And I used more colour than you probably would do with this period. So we've pushed it a bit as well. Just to sort of make it not *too* period, make it look more interesting.

MONSOON SEASON

AWARD-WINNING STAGE ACTRESS, BROADWAY BOMBSHELL AND NEWEST *DOCTOR WHO* VILLAIN – JINKX MONSOON IS HITTING THE HIGH NOTES

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

WHEN *SFX* CATCHES UP with Jinkx Monsoon in New York, she's in an entirely different sci-fi state of mind – less battling a lord of time and more tackling a carnivorous alien plant...

"Audrey is a character that I've always, always wanted to play, but just assumed no one would ask me because I'm not a cis woman," she explains of her starring role in *Little Shop Of Horrors* at Manhattan's Westside Theatre.

"I thought if I ever played Audrey, it would be in an all-queer production. But when the Westside Theatre reached out, it was just an immediate yes. Everything about it has just been profoundly wonderful. It's been a very, very affirming experience. I never dreamed that I'd be transitioning at the same time that I'm playing the female lead in one of my favourite musicals, but here we are," she roars with laughter – which she does a *lot*.

CODE BREAKER

Sci-fi and fantasy is something the two-time winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race* says she's always been a fan of. It's *Doctor Who* – and her role as mysterious malevolent god Maestro in "The Devil's Chord" – that has once more catapulted Monsoon back onto screens around the world.

"Drag queens are especially apt for heightened performance such as sci-fi, horror or fantasy, because we already live in the world of the extreme and the absurd," she explains. "I think you might be surprised at how many drag performers are huge *Doctor Who* nerds, because we love to escape into fantasy.

"Queerness has always been infused in these extreme forms of storytelling. I love citing the fact that people were upset that the Chucky scripted series had a queer character and they're like, 'Now even Chucky is queer'. Hey, guess what? Chucky was created by a queer person. Sorry, it was always queer. It was always coded to be queer. It was always coded to resonate with queer people and queer people fucking love Chucky, I don't know why.

"It's the same with *Doctor Who*," she suggests. "When straight fans complain about any kind of progressive step that *Doctor Who* takes, I just think how ridiculous they seem, →

because they love this show that's [run] by a queer writer who is a prolific voice for our generation. The fact that they could complain about it, it's obviously not your favourite show if something as small as a genderqueer character can shake your foundation of it.

"I'm so sick of people saying they're a fan of a show and then getting so irate if it does something you don't like. It's still the same show you like, why don't you listen to it rather than put up your barriers? Why don't you let your favourite show teach you something new, like it has already done?"

She is, of course, talking complete sense. But for anyone still not willing to listen, she has a polite suggestion.

"Popular opinion is in the favour of the queer community for the first time in my life and I'll be damned if I let anyone force us to retreat. But I think people are going to find that for every transphobic *Doctor Who* viewer who drops out, we're going to have three new young viewers who come in *because* they love to see the representation.

"So if you're done with the show because it's taking a progressive step forward, don't let the door hit you on the way out. We've got a ton more fans coming in and we're not gonna miss you."

COSMIC CLIMB

Aside from being a fan of the show, she's been a friend of showrunner Russell T Davies for years. It was seeing Monsoon perform in her show *Together Again, Again* – where she plays herself in her eighties, "a crazy shut-in Norma Desmond version of Jinkx" – that prompted Davies to consider that the character he was writing should be played by her.

"When I got the script," Monsoon makes a delightfully giddy noise, "it said Maestro, and in the character description it said, 'Think the Joker, the Child Catcher from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and Jinkx Monsoon.' My *name* was in the script.

"He saw something in my performance of that weird, weird show and went, 'That's what I want in this character.' It just really touches my heart. It felt very, very genuine because he had been seeing my shows for years. When I got the role, I was like, 'Oh yeah, this is my role. I see why you want me to play this!" she says.

"There's some Jinkx in there, because I'm Jinkx, and I'm playing it, but Maestro doesn't feel like Jinkx to me. There's elements of the Joker – the manic ability to switch on a dime, but Maestro feels like their own character to me.

"If we took everything we knew about Marie Antoinette and applied it to the Devil, that's Maestro," she laughs. "It's where Marie Antoinette meets the Bible's depiction of the Devil. Just those two inspirations."

Monsoon also has her own ideas about the motivation of a wayward god. "What was so exciting about that is gods, they make their own rules," she offers. "Gods are not inhibited by gender, or time or age, or sexuality. They're eternal. One thing I've always thought about with characters like that is how bored they get. It's something we see with Anne Rice's vampires – they're creating their own entertainment because when you're immortal, nothing entertains you any more. So when I was playing Maestro it was like everything was so blasé until I met the Doctor – this is the first exciting thing that's happened to me in aeons, right?

"Then Maestro has their whole mission and they're trying to create something beautiful. In terms of gods, what's the extinction of the human race to a bunch of immortal, eternal beings? That's nothing compared to what Maestro thinks this beautiful thing they're going to create is.

"When I play a villain, what I love to do is figure out why the villain thinks they're right. There's some villains you can just go, 'I'm evil' and that's all you need. Some villains are just evil for the sake of being evil and that exists. But to me, what's more interesting in a villain is when they think they're in the right – when they believe that what they're doing is worth the sacrifice and the cost. Then that gives their mission something more than just 'I'm evil'. It's like, 'No, I'm trying to create something beautiful and you're standing in my way.'"

Monsoon says her co-stars and director were "just a dream to work with – they're just the sweetest, loveliest, realest people." She says

Jinkx Monsoon as Maestro in "The Devil's Chord".

Jinkx Monsoon back as her usual modest self.

PICTURES © BBC STUDIOS AND BAD WOLF. NATALIE SEERY, JAMES PARDON, EVAN ZIMMERMAN, JEREMY DANIEL

Maestro vamps it up in another scene.

You can never have *too* many outfits, after all.

Maestro's just trying to create beauty...

that Ncuti Gatwa gave her "the best compliment I've gotten in my professional career" when he described her as "a very generous scene partner".

"It meant a lot coming from him," she says, "because he's an *extremely* generous scene partner. When you have a person who's willing to do the full theme, and really play the scene, whether the cameras are on them or not, it makes your job so much more easier and fun – and that was working with Ncuti and Millie, they didn't half-ass a thing. These actors care about what they're doing. They care about doing their work well and they do it with a beautiful, friendly, light-hearted spirit. It was just a dream."

Monsoon is gushing with praise for everyone on set, who she says were "just incredible at their job".

"They came to me after I was cast with early concepts to run them by me and see how I felt. The character's nonbinary and they were having me wear all different types of outfits. They wanted to make sure I felt comfortable in each different outfit. I basically had no feedback other than, 'I love this. This is perfect'.

"The only thing that I added was they were saying, 'We were taking looks from famous musical moments in history to inspire Maestro's wardrobe.' Then I said, 'Well, if we want to be real it's probably that Maestro wore the outfit first and then the musicians were visited by Maestro at some point and got the idea for their outfit from Maestro.'

"So I don't know that that informed anything, but that was going on in my mind. So rather than thinking of Maestro's looks as demonic versions of Liberace or Sergeant Pepper or what have you, I was thinking these people ripped off Maestro's style," she hoots.

Now that she's got a taste for it, is there another sci-fi franchise Monsoon would like to appear in?

"*Star Trek: Discovery* has been so fantastically queer and has a wonderful queer cast already, I don't know that they need me but I'm a big *Star Trek* fan as well. You know what I really liked, and I'm sad it was shortlived, because I thought it was so damn good? *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* [the 2016 series]. If that ever came back in a form, I would *love* to be a part of it.

"What I like is there's been a lot of marrying of sci-fi and fantasy lately, because we're finding ways to explain magic with science. So if any show needs a space witch, I'm perfect for that. It's not sci-fi, but I think drag queens would be especially suited to play characters like vampires, demons, which is any kind of mythical something or other. Drag queens, we already operate on that level. So give us the roles, we're ready."

> **"Maestro has their whole mission and they're trying to create something beautiful"**

Once her dream role on Skid Row finishes at the end of May, Monsoon returns to play Mama Morton in *Chicago* for 20 performances until 12 July. As for a certain other musical reprise, it sounds like Maestro has unfinished business – certainly in Monsoon's mind.

"What I love about my episode is Maestro was not necessarily permanently defeated. And I don't know, but I sensed some chemistry between Maestro and the Doctor even though they're nemeses. So, I just think there's a world of opportunity there," she cackles.

"I gotta tell you, the whole thing was a dream job. But when the director says, 'Hey, Maestro, I think you could be just a tad more flirty with the Doctor on that line.' Then I'm like, 'Okay, you want me to flirt with Ncuti? Sure.'" She roars with laughter. "What a *dream job*, right?"

Visit jinkxmonsoon.com.

(Left) As Audrey in *Little Shop Of Horrors.*

(Left) In *Chicago.* (Right) Day wear!

THE DYING DAYS

RTD's reboot of *On The Buses* CONFIRMED!

RUSSELL T DAVIES, NCUTI GATWA AND MILLIE GIBSON LOOK AHEAD TO THE TWO-PART SEASON FINALE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

THE END IS NIGH FOR THE series that writer and showrunner Russell T Davies promises will have "the biggest finale *ever*" in "The Legend Of Ruby Sunday" and "Empire Of Death" – where they return to UNIT HQ. Are the three who rule ready? And what do they think is the message of season one?

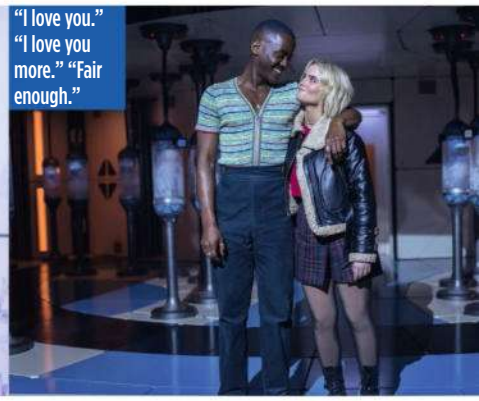
How do you feel about the finale?

NG: [Expels a deep breath] I mean, if I'm completely honest with you, it's a blur. It's an *absolute* blur. I don't know what I can tell you. Every day you had to give *every* single part of yourself to it. You had to rip your soul out.
MG: It was an emotional ride *every* day in seven and eight. There's not much humour in seven and eight, is there? More so eight.
RTD: Eight's dark.
NG: [Struggles to articulate it] It's like the darkest of scenarios.
RTD: Apocalyptic.
MG: I think the days were longer, because usually it's just me and Ncuti. But the finale had a bigger cast in these ones. So we had to redo everything again and again and again, it was just a little bit more intense.
NG: Also, what was hard about that was that we were facing, of course, the greatest monster I've ever, ever ever faced in my life and it was operated by little green men [laughs loud]. It was a lot of energy of, "I have to be terrified by this thing," and I'm trying not to laugh!
MG: My eyes went funny. At one point we did it so many times I think I went bog-eyed and I was like, I can't... "Which green man am I looking at?"
RTD: Despite the most intense story in history, it does have Ncuti on a Vespa with Bonnie Langford – don't tell me there's no jokes in it, that is absolutely hilarious!
NG: It delivers, I can't tell you...
RTD: I do love a season finale. One of the reasons I came back to *Doctor Who* was the chance to write those great big two-parters, you don't get the chance to be that epic in any other show. And don't forget, I think about *Doctor Who* all day long, so I've had ideas swirling around for decades. At least 40 years! There are *very* clear links to stories from the 1980s in what's coming up. Their time has come!

What do you hope people will take away from season one?

MG: Oh... I think people will be ringing up their best friends and asking how they are...
RTD: Oh, Millie.
NG: Oh, *Millie*!
RTD: Oh darling... I agree. I just love that. Put that down as me saying that. [All roar laughing]
MG: That's how I always feel. In any episode, though. At the end you're like, "Oh, how's so and so?"
NG: [Laughing] Oh, Mills!
RTD: You two have been through the wringer!
MG: I think with "Rogue" you'll be like, "Oh my god, I need to text so and so. I need a drink!"
NG: Yeah! That one will leave you in a dark place. [Laughs] That's such a beautiful thing, Mills. Yeah, you will be calling.
RTD: It leads into seven and eight, doesn't it.
NG: Awww, Russy-poos!

Millie and Ncuti get all emosh at series end.



"I love you." "I love you more." "Fair enough."

PICTURES: JAMES PARDON, JONANTHAN BIRCH © BBC STUDIOS

> **Literally a new audience will find it and they'll love it just like I loved it all my life**

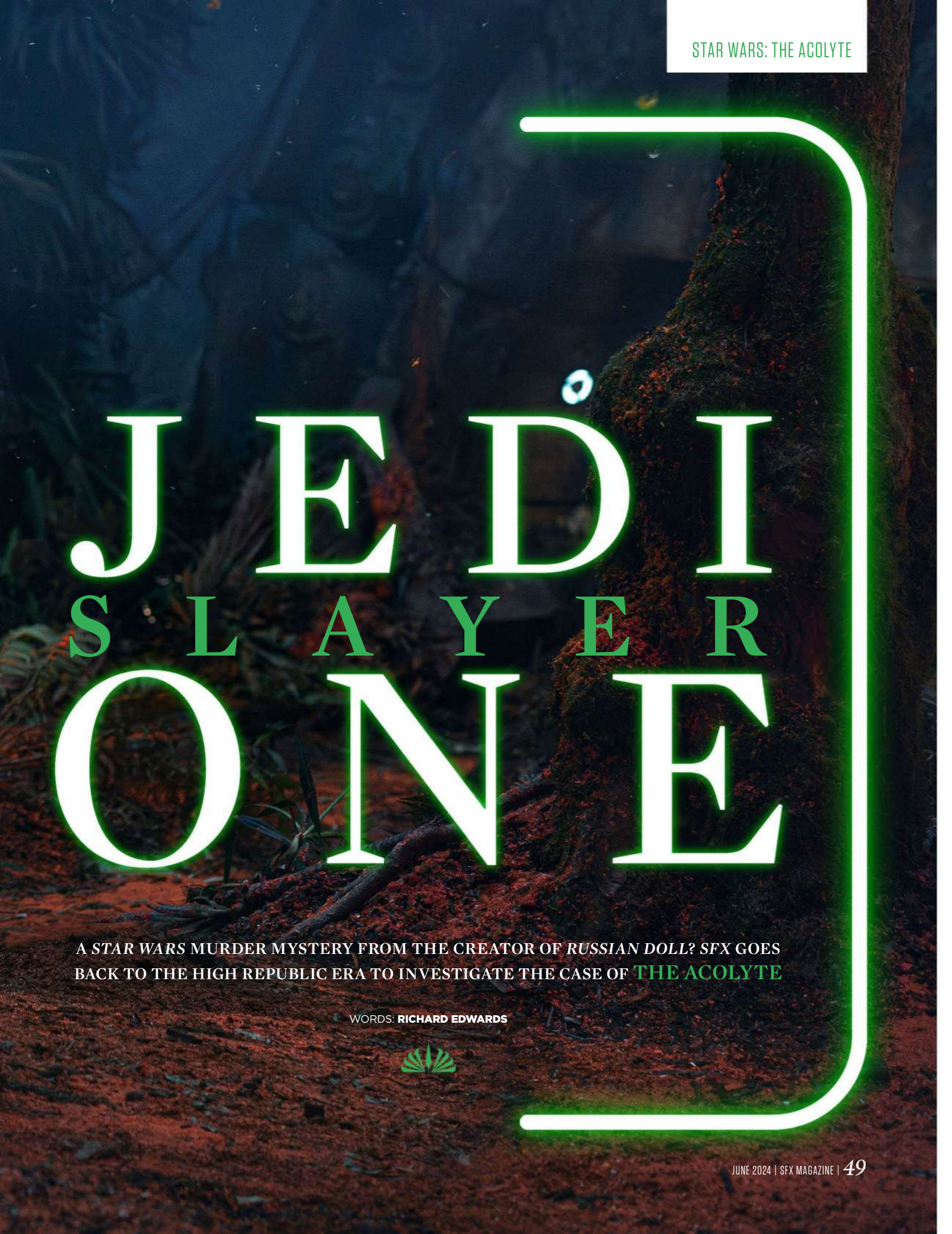
RTD: I hope that a new audience comes out of it with a love for *Doctor Who*. I keep saying the most important thing about this is we're dropping worldwide, and the show has always sold very well worldwide. But not like this. It's been worldwide with subtitles, or maybe a year later they dub it very quickly with some old gangster sitting in a corner. This has been properly dubbed and subtitled simultaneously for release in all those countries, all those distant countries getting it in Italian, in French or German, all at once. I wonder what your voices are like. [Gatwa mentions Eric having been dubbed]
RTD: What? Eric the space baby?
NG: WHAT?! *Eric Effiong*! [His *Sex Education* character] My god... [Howling]
RTD: He said in interviews yesterday that Eric's dead and I went, "What? You can't say [baby] Eric's dead!"
NG: Eric Effioing is dead and gone, it's only the Doctor now. [All of them in hysterics]
RTD: *Anyway*, I was harmlessly saying it's now in all these languages, which is amazing, so literally a new audience will find it and they'll love it just like I loved it all my life.

What's an interesting piece of information about *Doctor Who* you've learned?

NG: [To Gibson] You had a really good one the other day about suicide rates on Christmas Day.
MG: Every time there's a Christmas episode that year there's less suicides the year following. So there you go – that just shows how beautiful of a show and how much it means to people.
NG: There's a lot of medical reports about how *Doctor Who* saves lives.
MG: And Christmas-time is such a horrendous time. So watching it, it just means a lot to people. It fits Christmas for sure. So that's mine.
NG: I find Christmas very hard, and the *Doctor Who* special made it lovely.
RTD: Ncuti, you said the other day that you knew William Hartnell's Doctor met two of his companions, like yours, in a nightclub in 1965. I went home last night thinking, "How did he know that?"
NG: I did know that, Russell.
RTD: How? Was that online or something?
NG: Whaddya mean how? Research! [Laughs]

The three at the official season premiere.

Doctor Who is on BBC One, iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).



JEDI SLAYER ONE

A *STAR WARS* MURDER MYSTERY FROM THE CREATOR OF *RUSSIAN DOLL*? *SFX* GOES BACK TO THE HIGH REPUBLIC ERA TO INVESTIGATE THE CASE OF THE ACOLYTE

WORDS: **RICHARD EDWARDS**

> "For me, it's the best action the franchise has seen – and there's so much of it"

FROM A CERTAIN POINT OF VIEW. It's a phrase that's loomed large over *Star Wars* ever since Obi-Wan Kenobi tried to pretend he hadn't fibbed about the fate of Luke Skywalker's dad. Since then, Anakin's whined that, from his POV, the Jedi are evil, while fandom remains torn over *The Last Jedi*: is it a bona fide classic or a disastrous disturbance in the Force?

Now the latest Disney+ show is asking us to look at its story from multiple perspectives. The result? The next time a film studies student reminds you that George Lucas's original *Star Wars* was heavily influenced by Akira Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress*, you can instantly shoot back that *The Acolyte* shares elements of the Japanese director's multiple-POV classic *Rashomon*.

Set a century or so before *The Phantom Menace* – towards the end of the era known as the High Republic – *The Acolyte* sees a flourishing Jedi Order shaken when an unknown assassin starts bumping off its members. While it's clearly bad news for lightsaber-wielders everywhere, it's also a fantastic opportunity for creator/showrunner Leslye Headland – who made her name with tricksy *Groundhog Day*-tinged time-loop drama *Russian Doll* – to approach the story through multiple sets of eyes, and blur the lines between good and evil.

"Sometimes we are in the Jedi point of view," producer Rayne Roberts tells *SFX*, "and sometimes we get to be in the point of view of the mysterious assailant. You might have thought something happened one way but it's like, 'Oh, wait a minute...'

"This was a fun idea that Leslye wanted to flesh out when we were developing the episodes. It really speaks to the way her brain works. I tell people she has this puzzle brain, and if you look at her storytelling in *Russian Doll*, there's a puzzle that starts to unfold. Part of the way that puzzle unfolds in *The Acolyte* is through those *Rashomon* points of view."

DESTINY CALLING

Destiny is another recurring theme in *Star Wars*, and it surely applies to Headland's involvement in *Star Wars*. (*SFX*, sadly, was unable to pin her down in time for our deadline.) There's no shortage of filmmakers who'll tell you about the influence *Star Wars* had on their formative years, but Headland's fandom goes the extra parsec.

"I've been working on *Star Wars* for 11 years now and I think, in terms of the mythology, she's probably the most well-versed filmmaker I've had the chance to collaborate with," says Roberts. "Not only has she watched all the films and all the animation, she's read all the EU [Expanded Universe] novels, and she also does deep dives into the online lore. With *The Acolyte* she knew exactly what she was saying with these new characters and how to tie them into the larger mythology."

And as if it wasn't already feeling like the midi-cholorians themselves were willing Headland and Lucasfilm's paths to cross, her pitch was set in an era that – at the time – remained completely unexplored in official canon. (Though, unknown to her, Lucasfilm was already working on Project Luminous, the series of books and comics that would become the High Republic.)

"It truly was a weird coincidence," admits Roberts. "Leslye knew that [time period] was green space, and at the same time [Lucasfilm]'s publishing group had identified that as green space as well. So when Leslye came in, we actually put those groups together really early, and she was super-excited to pull in some of the things they were creating for the High Republic into the show."

"This is the first time you've ever seen the High Republic in live-action," adds producer Simon Emanuel. "There's an incredible freedom to that – a freedom in design, in characters and story." Remarkably, *The Acolyte* will be the first live-action *Star Wars* story to be told outside the seven decades of the Skywalker Saga.

Even more tantalising, perhaps, was Headland's original elevator pitch, a mish-mash of genres so intriguing that Lucasfilm was highly unlikely to let it go.

"Leslye said it was *Frozen* meets *Kill Bill* in *Star Wars*," recalls Roberts. "It immediatedly communicated a kind of emotional entanglement and also high-octane action. It was like, 'I think I understand what that is,' and it started a conversation that led to me elevating her pitch, ultimately up to Kathy [Kennedy, Lucasfilm president]. Leslye is an amazing storyteller and when she finally pitched Kathy, everyone was crying. It was that kind of meeting."

"The thing I picked up on and got very excited about was *Kill Bill*," adds Emanuel. "One of the things we talked about really early on was action, and I really believe that, in these kinds of shows, action has to be a character. It can't just be, 'Give me a punch, give me a lightsaber fight...' So I introduced Leslye to a guy called Chris Clark Cowan, who was our action designer, and part of the team who worked on the Darth Vader sequence in *Rogue One*. Leslye and Chris completely fell in love, and action became such a component of this story. For me, it's the best action the franchise has seen – and there's so much of it."

While the lightsabers will look familiar, this is not the Jedi Order as we've seen it before. The organisation is – reckons Emanuel – 10,000 members strong, and functioning at the →

Mae and Jedi Master Indara get in some training.

Mae (Amandla Stenberg) practises her brooding.

Vernestra Rwoh (Rebecca Henderson) and Master Sol (Lee Jung-jae).

Jedi Master Kelnacca (Joonas Suotamo).

Jedi Padawan Jecki Lon (Dafne Keen): pull *this*.

EXPANDING UNIVERSE

Star Wars is stretching out into new sectors of the timeline

Star Wars may inhabit an entire galaxy with thousands of years of – albeit made-up – history, but up to now, every live-action movie and TV show has been compressed into the relatively brief seven-decade period between *The Phantom Menace* and *The Rise Of Skywalker*. That all changes when *The Acolyte* heads back to the High Republic era – and now Lucasfilm seems eager to expand the timeline even further back and forwards.

"Coming off *The Rise Of Skywalker*, we really had to take stock of what we were working with," says *The Acolyte* producer Rayne Roberts. "It was communicated as being the end of the 'Skywalker Saga', and we had to ask where we'd go next. We said, 'Well, we have this amazing, long timeline in which we can populate these stories, and now the exercise is to be thoughtful about how we place stories in each of those eras.'"

With a Rey-fronted *Rise Of Skywalker* follow-up and a Jedi origins movie (directed by *Indiana Jones And The Dial Of Destiny*'s James Mangold) both in the works, the universe is set to spread in both directions. "James Mangold's *Jedi Prime* is set thousands and thousands of years before [the original trilogy], and I'm really excited to see what happens there," adds producer Simon Emanuel.

"Backwards, forwards, and all the different places you can go is exciting. What really excites me about possible future stories is that you can lean into different genres in this universe. Doing things that feel new is hard, but I really hope *The Acolyte* is successful and opens the door to us maybe experimenting more, and taking some swings."

TASTE THE RAINBOW

A full spectrum of lightsabers

RED
The ultimate Sith Lord accessory, as modelled by Darth Vader.

ORANGE
Ahsoka's Shin Hati is bad but not *that* bad.

YELLOW
What better way for Rey to bring balance to the force than by going yellow?

GREEN
After misplacing his dad's old lightsaber on Bespin, Luke went green.

BLUE
The hero's choice, used by Obi-Wan, Anakin, Luke and even non-Jedi Finn.

INDIGO
You can turn Cal Kestis's 'saber indigo in videogame *Jedi: Fallen Order*.

VIOLET
George Lucas allowed Samuel L Jackson to break ranks by going purple.

WHITE
Ahsoka Tano opts for 'sabers that go with anything.

BLACK
The ceremonial Mandalorian darksaber forgoes colour altogether.

height of its powers. So, in direct contrast to previous iterations of *Star Wars* where the Jedi have been on the back foot, here we see them fulfilling their primary role: as keepers of the peace, *not* soldiers. Unfortunately, when you're living in that kind of environment, you don't expect your colleagues to start dropping dead at the hand of an upstart assassin (played by Amandla Stenberg) who has a distinctly anti-Jedi agenda.

"There's no real looming threat out there, so they're just doing their duties," explains Roberts. "They're investigating weird things around the galaxy and being dispatched to resolve conflicts. There's nothing alarming the Jedi as a whole until they begin getting attacked and the events of *The Acolyte* start to unfold."

How and why the Jedi find themselves on the killer's hitlist is at the heart of a series that's been described as an interplanetary detective drama. "The detective element is very high in the mix," says Roberts. "I would say the story engine of the show is tracking down the assailant. It's not procedural, but they are on the hunt, looking at clues, talking to people and trying to figure out where things might go next."

"It's not a sleuthing show," expands Emanuel, "but it's a show with mysteries and reveals. Hopefully that comes back to Leslye's puzzle box storytelling, and I think it's going to be really rewarding to the audience to see how things unfold. It's a different genre take on *Star Wars*, but it's still utterly *Star Wars* in its essence."

ACOLYTE AND DARK

Then there's the conundrum of that cryptic title, a word loaded with meaning in franchise lore. In the old Expanded Universe (now non-canon and rebranded as "Legends"), an acolyte was traditionally a follower of the Dark Side, typically a rung or two down from the Sith pulling the strings.

"Obviously there's been a lot of debate on the meaning of the word 'acolyte'," teases Roberts. "That's a mystery I think the show will reveal, but I wouldn't want to spoil it for you – it might not be what you expect."

It is, however, safe to say that the Dark Side is involved somehow, and that the events that unfold here will have some bearing on the rise of a certain Sith Lord going by the name of Sidious – and subsequent fall of the Jedi – some 100 years later.

That said, Roberts is quick to point out that *The Acolyte* is neither *Episode Minus One*, nor a *Star Wars*-shaped spin through the last days of Rome.

"I'd say this is more like one story of the Jedi being fallible and vulnerable," she explains. "Right now the Jedi and the Republic have a really strong and productive relationship, and

Manny Jacinto as Qimir sports a dashing cowl.

Mother Aniseya (Jodie Turner-Smith).

Yord Fandar, Jecki Lon and Master Sol: ooh, pretty!

it's a time of peace. There are probably tons of examples of when the Republic started to break down, but this is just one that starts to point things in that direction. *The Phantom Menace* and the prequels were about the geopolitics and the Jedi's relationship with the Republic beginning to fracture, but our story is much more zoomed-in on characters and their relationships. It has implications, but that galactic scope is really reserved for the prequels."

GATEWAY DRUG

Both Roberts and Emanuel believe you don't need to be familiar with the stories of the High Republic to get into *The Acolyte*: "It's a gateway, and you don't need to know *anything* about *Star Wars* to be able to drop in," Emanuel says.

And in terms of the wider *Star Wars* mythology, the show marks a rare opportunity to tell a story that isn't on a direct collision course with existing canon. Indeed, there's an entire century of that precious "green space" to explore before a kid going by the name of Skywalker announces his arrival at the Boonta Eve Classic podrace.

"That's been the most fun aspect, because we're not backing into anything that's pre-decided," says Roberts. "They're new characters, all of their fates were up to Leslye and the writing room, so it's going to be really fun, I hope, to see where they go."

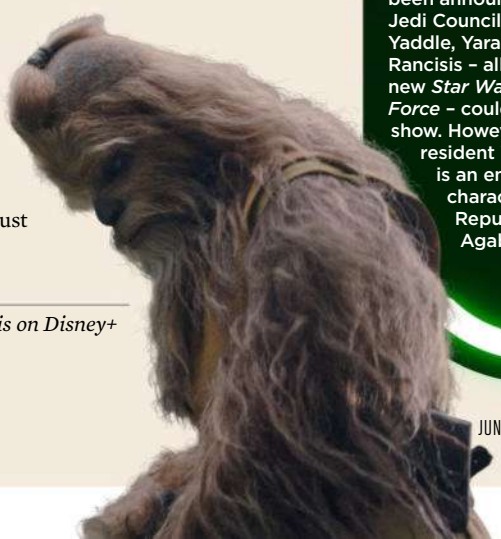
As for potential future seasons and a possible endgame for the story...

"There's some things the show points to," Roberts continues. "We've got to get back into the writers' room for season two to see where we're at. We have some initial thoughts about what we want to do, but in terms of where the story will ultimately wrap up, that hasn't been quite nailed down yet."

"We want to make sure this season has an ending – some catharsis – but you always want to leave the door open," says Emanuel. "We've talked about where the story could go, and Leslye has so many ideas – and like anything, if something's successful, you can bet you'll find other stories within it.

"And God willing, if people love the show, I think that really opens *Star Wars* up. I mean, think about it. This is a gigantic galaxy that George created, and really up to now we've just been dipping our toe in the water."

Star Wars: The Acolyte is on Disney+ from 4 June.



HIGH TIMES

A crash course in the High Republic

The High Republic era takes place between 500 and 100 years (or thereabouts) before the events of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. It's a time of peace and a good time to be a Jedi, long before Palpatine has his wicked way with the universe.

It's a multimedia project built around interweaving books, web series, comics and audio dramas. The storytelling is split into three phases: Light Of The Jedi, Quest Of The Jedi and Trials Of The Jedi.

The storytelling kicked off in earnest with Charles Soule's 2021 novel *Light Of The Jedi*. The book sees the Order leaping into action after the destruction of a starship in hyperspace puts billions of lives at risk.

It also introduces the Nihil, the series' main antagonists. Led by "Eye of the Nihil" Marchion Ro, these masked pirates prove to be a thorn in the Republic's side, largely thanks to their mastery of obscure hyperspace lanes.

Youngling animation *Young Jedi Adventures* is also set in the High Republic era, but – aside from a few cameos from Master Yoda – the young sprogs' exploits don't trouble franchise canon.

The only existing High Republic character confirmed to appear in *The Acolyte* is Vernestra Rwoh. This fan-favourite appears as a teenage prodigy in the books, but by the time of the new TV show she's over a century old and a venerable Jedi elder. She'll reportedly still be wielding her trademark purple lightsaber.

While no other cameos have been announced, long-lived Jedi Council veterans Yoda, Yaddle, Yarael Poof and Oppo Rancisis – all of whom feature in new *Star Wars* novel *The Living Force* – could appear in the new show. However, *The Acolyte*'s resident Wookiee Kelnacca is an entirely different character to the High Republic's Burryaga Agaburry.

PEDAL TO

DIRECTOR GEORGE MILLER AND ACTRESS ANYA TO TELL IMPERATOR FURIOSA'S FULL STORY IN

THE MEAT

TAYLOR-JOY REVEAL THE ROAD THEY TRAVELLED

FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

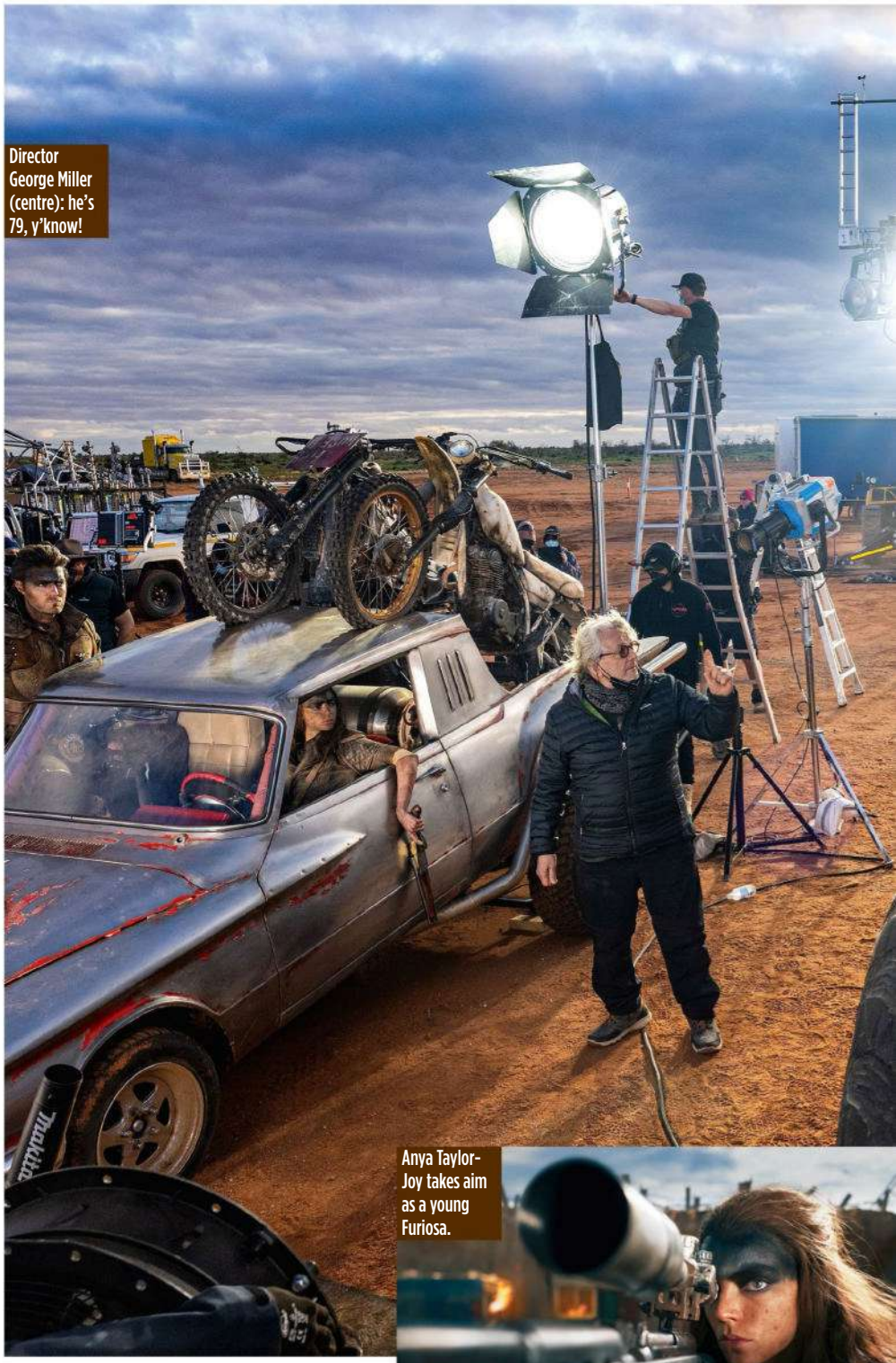
THERE ARE FEW WRITER/directors who can boast a filmmaking career as eclectic and successful as George Miller's. The multiple BAFTA and Academy Award winner possesses a singular CV that covers 50 years of film projects made up entirely of wild, incongruous swings.

From beloved family classics like *Babe* (1995) and *Happy Feet* (2006) to the heavy drama of *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992), Miller has built a career around writing characters that compelled him, crafting great films around them, and letting the naysayers be damned.

The cinematic series that tops and tails the span of his career is centred on his ultimate rebel character creation: Mad Max. At 79, Miller has been making *Mad Max* films for more than half his life. While he took a hefty 30-year break from the franchise he created with producer Byron Kennedy, the character kept chasing him.

When he did return to his bleak, testosterone-fuelled, post-apocalyptic landscape in 2015 with *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Miller came at his world like a man possessed. Not only did his gonzo shooting style get amped to the nth degree, he and screenwriters Brendan McCarthy and Nico Lathouris injected the world with a feminist slant.

In the process, Max's (Tom Hardy) story literally took a back seat to the mission of Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) and the women she frees from warlord Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne).



Director George Miller (centre): he's 79, y'know!

FURIOUS GEORGE

In Furiosa, Miller created a fierce hero infused with a purpose that Max had been lacking since the original film. She was laser-focused in her purpose: returning to the "Green Place" of her childhood to reunite with the female Vuvalini clan.

Theron's Furiosa was a force of nature to behold and forever changed the tone and tenor of Miller's franchise. With *Fury Road* becoming the most triumphant instalment in the series, both financially and critically, the director knew he had to give the character her due.

Nine years later, *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* arrives, a prequel focusing on the origin story of Furiosa as she earns her way to the Imperator title. Actress Anya Taylor-Joy (*The Witch*) puts on the warpaint this time, in a story that covers almost 16 years of Furiosa's embattled young life.

Origin stories can be tricky when it comes to creating meaningful stakes for audiences who already know how the story turns out. But Miller tells *SFX* that in this particular case, *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* technically came first and is a chapter of the character's history that inspired everything in *Fury Road*. "We'd written the Furiosa story before we shot *Fury Road*," Miller explains. "We told the story of the 16 to 18 years that led up to *Fury Road*, and we had to do that in order not only to cast, but so the crew, the designers and everybody knew what was happening. [It] was the backstory of everything."

He adds that everything from the props to the bespoke car designs and even the language cadences in *Fury Road* were born from Furiosa's backstory. The script was so strong that Miller says when he presented it to Theron to use as prep for her character in *Fury Road*, she asked to instead make it first. "I said, 'No, we're preparing the other film. We have to

Anya Taylor-Joy takes aim as a young Furiosa.

Just some lads out for a relaxing Sunday drive.

do it,'" he remembers. "But I took that as an endorsement of the strength of the story. It's different than *Fury Road*. It basically falls into the category of an odyssey, as it happens over an extended period of time. It's one of those stories that if the planets aligned, and everything fell into place, I felt compelled to tell it."

Miller was just 32 when he embarked upon making his feature-length directorial debut with *Mad Max*, and he admits it very much kicked his ass. "It was such a tough experience," he sighs. "I was so inexperienced that I thought I'd never make another movie, let alone make a *Mad Max* movie."

A gritty, violent action tour de force, *Mad Max* was made for a paltry $350,000 Australian dollars. It was distributed worldwide by Warner Bros, turning into a cult hit that made $100 million at the global box office and sealed the director's fate in terms of making more instalments of Max Rockatansky's story. "That's when I made it my job to figure out why the first *Mad Max* worked when, in many ways, it had no right to," Miller says. "I began to see that we'd hit on some universal archetype."

In 1981, Miller followed up with *Mad Max 2*, which he describes as a film with a completely "different tone and different story", that focused on one character. "*Mad Max 2* was much more deliberately mythological, let's say. Then *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* was the same."

> **"To make it clear, the story of Furiosa and Fury Road are part of the same canon"**

In the ensuing three decades, while making seven other films, Miller says he didn't want to think about *Mad Max* any more, but he couldn't help it. Everyone badgered him about making another chapter. So, after many stops and starts, Miller came up with *Fury Road* and Furiosa's full story.

"To make it clear, the story of *Furiosa* and *Fury Road* are part of the same canon, and that will be unmistakable when you see the movie," he explains. "And indeed, we also have a story for Mad Max. All the stories intersect because *Furiosa* happened in the process of making *Mad Max: Fury Road*. So different circumstances apply to these two films from those that were made all those years ago."

While Charlize Theron embodied Imperator Furiosa to perfection, Miller always knew he would need to recast to portray the character's story from childhood to young womanhood.

"Unlike *Fury Road*, which happens over three days and two nights, this happens over at least 16 years from the age of 10 until she's about 26 or 28," the director says. "So I was looking for someone who had the same resolute, fierce quality that Charlize brought to the character."

FINDING FURIOSA

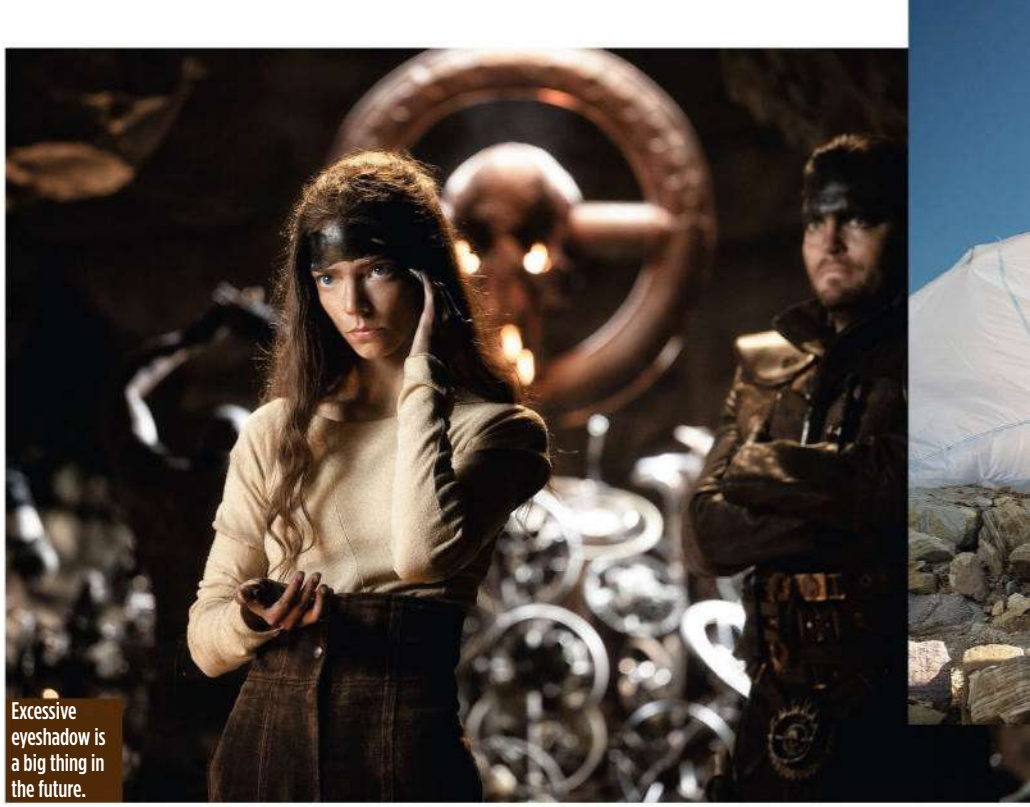
Miller says it was his friend Edgar Wright who first encouraged him to look at Anya Taylor-Joy during an early screening of Wright's film *Last Night In Soho* (2021). As he watched, Miller says she had a "mysterious intensity" that drew him in.

"I found her very compelling," he admits. "I remember I turned to talk to Edgar and I said, 'Now, Anya, she'd be great for...' and I didn't finish the sentence. He said, 'Do it! Do it!' straight away. He didn't even know what film I was talking about," the director laughs. "But he said, 'She's great. She's very, very hard-working and she will be able to bring whatever you want.'"

Miller says in his research he also found some important "overlaps in life experience" between Taylor-Joy and Theron that connected the two women.

"For instance, they were both trained from an early age in ballet, which requires a tremendous amount of discipline," he explains, "The same discipline you need for the physicality of an actor, particularly in a stunt action movie like this."

Meanwhile, Taylor-Joy's career was in the ascendant from the critical raves she drew for →


Excessive eyeshadow is a big thing in the future.

Emma (2020) and *Soho*. She made her film debut in Robert Eggers's *The Witch*, which premiered the same year as *Fury Road* (2015).

"I saw that film as a fan," Taylor-Joy says of *Fury Road*, "And I fell in love with it in that way. Genuinely, when I think back on my cinematic experiences, that one really stands out because I knew that I had seen a masterpiece. That film finished and I was like, 'Wow, that's really blown my mind.'"

When Miller offered her the part, Taylor-Joy says she was honoured to take on the mantle of a character whom she calls a feminist icon. "I don't think you can really argue with that," she asserts.

"Her arrival on our screens 10 years ago ushered in a very new era of the way that we represented women on screen and the kinds of roles that men decided that women could have, at the time anyway. So it feels wonderful to be able to continue her story and to have people care so much."

AUSSIE RIDER

Miller says young Furiosa's tale starts with her life with her mother (Charlee Fraser) in the Green Place of Many Mothers, then yanks her into the world of marauding men like Immortan Joe, Praetorian Jack (Tome Burke) and Warlord Dementus and his Biker Horde.

Sporting a prosthetic nose and a full-on Aussie accent, Chris Hemsworth is almost unrecognisable as Dementus as he slots into the pantheon of over-the-top heavies that make up this post-apocalyptic Wasteland. Miller admits that casting global superstar Hemsworth was not on his mind, despite the actor hailing from Australia.

"I knew Chris's work as more than just Thor, and I know people who had worked with him, and spoke very highly about his work ethic and so on," Miller says. "But I didn't compute [him] with the character that I had in mind."

However, Hemsworth was interested in being part of a *Mad Max* movie so his team asked for a meeting, which was set up, and gave the actor and the director the opportunity to just talk.

"I was really struck by how considered he was," Miller says. "He's a fully rounded person and the more I got to know him and his family, and all the things about him, it made a lot of sense.

"I realised he's one of those people who has a very broad understanding of story," Miller continues. "It's not only his character, but the way that that character fits into the whole. And of course, he's very physically adept. Like the ballet dancers, he's got a lot of physical skill."

After delays due to Covid, production on *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga* finally began in 2022 when the actors were put through their paces by the 77-year-old Miller.

"The first conversation that George and I ever had was [him asking] how many of the stunts we want to do. I said, 'Whatever you'll let me do, I'll do it,'" Taylor-Joy remembers. "I've always been very excited by the prospect of doing something as physical as this. My first day was being driven out to the middle of nowhere in California and being given a beaten-up car, and they're like, 'Have at it!'"

Taylor-Joy says she learned from the best via second unit director Guy Norris. "He's been with George since the very beginning. There are clips of Guy in the first *Mad Max* doing some pretty crazy stuff. They were unbelievably supportive. It was through their support that I felt like I could push myself further and further and further."

Just some lads out for a relaxing Sunday drive.

Chris Hemsworth as Warlord Dementus.

Hemsworth, George Miller and... Gandalf?

Judging by the trailer, Miller and company are clearly gunning to outdo themselves again with the combination of the wizardry of practical effects, stunts and CG augmentation in the dusty deserts of the merciless Wasteland.

"We're in an era, at least since the digital age, where we can do anything we want," Miller says of the execution of their visual ambitions.

"Yet on the other hand, the audiences, globally, are speed-reading cinema now. The language, the reading of cinema is in many ways faster, so you're always in a new world and in a new environment. We were doing things on this film that we couldn't even do 10 years ago on *Fury Road*, so that's what I find really interesting."

Taylor-Joy says Miller's set had three full units running, with him overseeing them all. "He was in his truck with three monitors going at all times," she says in awe. "I'd be on second unit where we'd do eight takes of a stunt. Then you get a call from George and he's like, 'No, her helmet has to be one centimetre higher on her forehead.' We'd bin those and go again," she laughs. "I think more than any other director, he really paints his scenes."

Now *that's* what you call a stylish facemask.

That includes Furiosa the character, too. Taylor-Joy remembers the day where Miller set up the reveal of her character in full iconic Imperator look.

"A lot of our cast and crew had made *Fury Road*," she explains. "By the time that we reached the zenith of the Furiosa that we see in this film, I came out in the Imperator costume to see people's reactions."

She says there was a collective gasp and that was the point where she could exhale and say, "'Yes! Okay, I've landed somewhere. This is fantastic.' It felt very cool as both a deep lover of Furiosa and a fan of this world to be able to wear it and be like, 'Wow, okay. This is gonna work.'" ●

Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga is in cinemas from 24 May.

THOR NO MORE!

Chris Hemsworth dives into his dark side as the Biker Horde leader, Warlord Dementus

Miller's *Mad Max* films are essentially their own Aussie cinematic universe. How did they impact you?
The films were a big part of my childhood. I have very vivid, nostalgic memories around watching those films and then the discussions with my dad, or my older brother, about the motorbikes and the cars in that world. Many years later, to be a part of it was a dream come true.

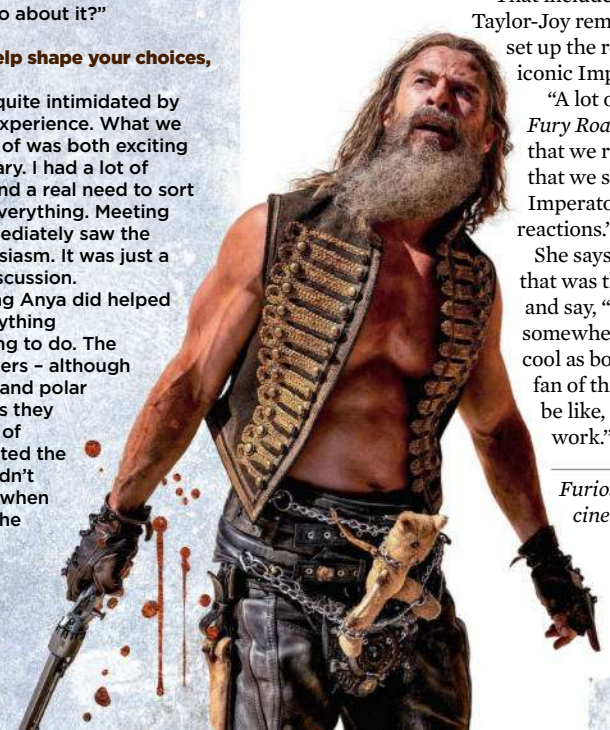
What was it like embracing an unabashedly villainous role?
It was somewhat liberating and refreshing to kind of shed the heroic Thor space and transform into something different, and not have to be restricted by the expectations of the hero, I guess. The first time I read the script, I felt a huge amount of creative impulses and ideas bubbling up, and then my conversations with George. This went on for a couple of years before we started shooting. I never had the luxury to sit with a character for two, three years before having actually stepped on set, so there was plenty bubbling under the surface.

What were your initial thoughts about Dementus?
Unlike other scripts, I didn't quite know who the character was. I kept having different ideas. Then the next week, something would contradict that. Two weeks out from shooting, I got really nervous because I hadn't clicked on what this character was. George suggested I journal in first person as the character and see what comes up. About 1am one night, I couldn't sleep and I grabbed my notepad and just started pen to paper and didn't think much of it. Woke up the next morning and was quite shocked by what I'd come up with in that half-sleep state. I showed it to George and we instantly went, "Ah, that's the direction..." and that now informs the why of the character.

What was blocking your approach, do you think?
I think I'd been caught up in the villainous nature of him for too long. I honed in on some sort of empathetic view of who he was, without justifying what he was doing. And getting to a point where I could go, "This is a savage, brutal world of survival and life is cheap, so you rule with an iron fist. Kill or be killed. Does this justify some of his actions and how can I go about it?"

Did Anya help shape your choices, as well?
Yeah. I felt quite intimidated by the whole experience. What we were a part of was both exciting and also scary. I had a lot of questions and a real need to sort of dissect everything. Meeting Anya, I immediately saw the same enthusiasm. It was just a constant discussion.

Everything Anya did helped inform everything I was wanting to do. The two characters – although as abrasive and polar opposites as they were – kind of complemented the journey. I didn't realise that when I first read the script.



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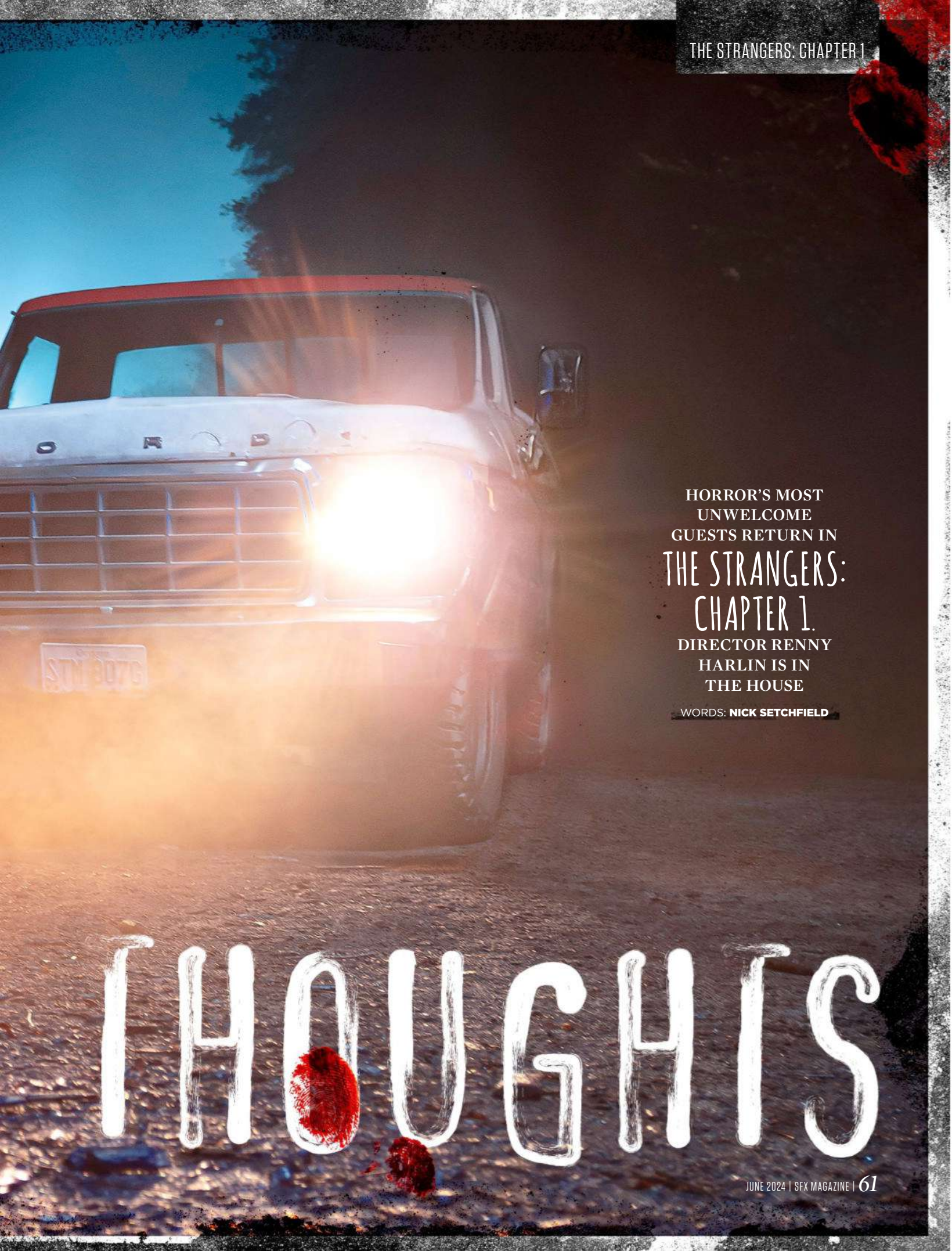


HORROR'S MOST UNWELCOME GUESTS RETURN IN

THE STRANGERS: CHAPTER 1.

DIRECTOR RENNY HARLIN IS IN THE HOUSE

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

THOUGHTS

RENNY HARLIN IS AIMING FOR your primal fears. Your poor, frazzled nerves and overloaded pulse will be collateral damage.

"It's so relatable," says the director of *The Strangers: Chapter 1*, a new take on 2008's knifey home invasion tale *The Strangers*. "As kids we all look under our beds or in the closet or out the window – is there some scary thing there?

"Of course, as we grow up we realise that there's no boogeyman and there are no ghosts and no monsters, no supernatural beings. But you should have been scared. Because there are other people who might be nuts, and just want the worst for you.

"The premise is so simple and so scary, and that makes it enjoyable, because you can see something so scary in the safety of the movie theatre or your home. You can see something so frightening yet know that you are safe."

Harlin allows himself a morbid chuckle. "At least you think you're safe..."

You thought the Airbnb in *Barbarian* was bad? Well...

RULES OF THE GAME

Inspired by true events – or so claimed the hype – Bryan Bertino's original movie traded in paranoia, terror and blood, a lean grindhouse slasher that found an enthusiastic audience on a budget of just $9 million. Liv Tyler and Scott Speedman starred as the couple who found their rural retreat besieged by three masked maniacs on a house call. Essentially it was a message movie, that message being for the love of all that's holy, don't open the door...

"I had no expectations when I walked into the theatre to see it," Harlin tells *SFX*. "I knew nothing. What impressed me was that it didn't try to explain anything. It showed a random incident. We know that, at least in America, these things happen a lot. Random home invasion, a violent incident where people lose their lives and there's no rhyme or reason to it.

"We always look for why and how and who, but sometimes there are no answers. Within that framework, they were able to make a movie that was absolutely terrifying, and felt real. That was my main thing about it – it felt absolutely real at all times, and that kept me engaged and riveted to the screen and relating to the characters.

"It was like a nightmare you couldn't get out of. You wait for there to be some kind of resolution or rescue or something in the end, but there's nothing. It just shows life at its barest and cruellest."

Harlin's best known for such testosterone-soused action fare as *Cliffhanger* and *Die Hard 2*. But while he's ventured into the realm of horror before – bringing us *A Nightmare On Elm Street 4: The Dream Master*, *The Covenant* and *Exorcist: The Beginning* – this feels like a departure for the Finnish helmer, a step into deeper, more vicious shadows. "It was challenging and daunting at the same time as it was thrilling," he admits. "I definitely wouldn't have done it if it was a sequel or something like that. I've done sequels, but I would have felt a little cheesy.

"It wasn't a remake, either, because that would also have been really hard. It was a retelling and a re-examination of this premise, of the original *Strangers*, which I loved, and I definitely felt intimidated to touch it."

So let's clear this up. Despite the words *Chapter 1* in the title, this isn't a prequel to the original film, which earned a belated sequel with 2018's *The Strangers: Prey At Night*.

"Absolutely not a prequel," Harlin confirms. "Basically it takes a young couple [*Riverdale*'s Madelaine Petsch and *Teen Wolf*'s Froy Gutierrez] on a road trip. They go into a little town, their car breaks down, they have to spend the night in a little house, an Airbnb, and then there's a home invasion. So that premise is the same as the first movie, because it is called *The Strangers* and we want to explore those killers that we saw in the original *Strangers*. In that sense we are setting it up the same way as the original film. But then we go on a whole different journey.

"Yeah, I know there's been some confusion about this. It's not a sequel to anything that you've seen before and it's not a prequel to anything that you've seen before."

Could we call it a requel? Harlin smiles, patiently. "It's a reimagining and a re-exploration of the whole topic."

In fact the title points to the sheer ambition of this franchise resurrection; Harlin is bringing us an entire trilogy, a symphony of slaughter shot back-to-back. "Obviously it's called *The Strangers*, so we need to base it on that premise. But then it turns into this huge, epic tale. Not to sound too lofty, but it's an

Froy Gutierrez and Madelaine Petsch star as the couple.

Director Renny Harlin (right) with the young cast.

Maya hears something – just the wind. Probably.

examination of the psyche of the killers and the psyche of the victims.

"It's really like making one movie and it's just split into three chapters. It's one huge movie that takes place in approximately five days. The objective was to show what happens to somebody if they survive this kind of horror. How does it affect them psychologically? What can it do to them?

"We also wanted to examine, without answering every question, why would somebody do something like this? What leads to that and what's behind it? A lot of the first movie deals with the same premise as the original movie, but then we completely continue on another journey, but with basically the same characters. Where the first movie ends, let's see what happens the next day."

The film's publicity promises we'll discover how the Strangers became the Strangers. But so much of the power of that psychopathic troika – Dollface, Pin-Up Girl and the sack-headed Man in the Mask – lies in their terrifying blankness, their absolute unknowability. They summon the random horror of the Manson Family slayings, the killer on the road Jim Morrison warned us about in "Riders On The Storm", without even an accompanying urban legend to make some desperate sense of their brutality. Do you risk sacrificing some of that power by giving the audience answers?

> **"We always look for why and how and who, but sometimes there are no answers"**

"Good question," acknowledges Harlin. "I know that I'm contradicting what I loved about the original film, which is there is no explanation, but at the same time I and a lot of other people were intrigued. Is there an explanation and could we find out? What does it all mean, [Dollface's question] 'Is Tamara home?' or 'Is Tamara here?', and why are these people doing it? Is it just for fun? All these questions that remain. So it felt like an interesting opportunity to take that premise and then expand on it.

"We just worked through the scripts very carefully. And the scripts were definitely a living beast that transformed during the shooting and even during the editing of the three films. We definitely want to keep the mystery alive because we understand that is the fascination with the original movie, and this whole concept.

"So we don't want to give clear-cut answers like, 'Okay, this guy had a bad childhood, so he decided to kill people,' but we want to explore certain things that might have happened before →

Madelaine Petsch was also an exec producer.

this. Like I say, it's not a prequel, but we will find out some things that led to this night.

"We don't necessarily learn a lot about their real identities. It's intended to be an exploration of the psyche of a serial killer, not necessarily how you become a serial killer. What makes you tick? How do you see the world? A sociopath doesn't really have to justify anything, but in a certain way how do you justify doing those horrible things?"

The plan is to release *Chapter 2* and *3* within months of the first entry. With Kevin Costner's upcoming two-part *Horizon: An American Saga* opting for a similar release pattern, are we looking at a new model for big-screen storytelling? "Damn Kevin Costner!" laughs Harlin. "I wanted to be the first!"

In fact Harlin *is* first. *The Strangers: Chapter 1* pips Costner's Cannes premiere by two whole days. "This is not your usual sequel structure," Harlin tells *SFX*. "It really is one big four-and-a-half hour film that is broken into three chapters. Obviously we want the audience to feel, once they've seen the first movie, that okay, they've got some answers, they understand a little more, but there's a hell of a lot more to see and to know.

> **"It's not meant to look like a reality show but still, the tone was extremely important"**

"My belief is that the audience is ready for something like this, partially because of the streaming TV experience, where you can binge-watch things. Why not do two movies at once, or three movies at once, and have them come out four or five months apart or something like that? So if you enjoy the first movie then you want to stick with those characters and find out more. I find it a very intriguing and interesting model and I'm as curious as I'm sure the studio is to find out if it works, if people will really embrace the idea of, 'Okay, it's not going to be two or three years later with some other people and some other story, it's actually the same story and I just have to wait a few months and I can keep going.'"

HOUSE WINS

Harlin says that shooting all three movies at once helped to keep the tone of the trilogy consistent. "The key thing is the reality. We always want to keep the reality of the situation intact. Between me and the producer and Madelaine Petsch, who became an executive producer on the movie, we were working very closely together, working every night on the script as we were shooting and the movies were developing.

"We were shooting all three movies kinda like this [entwines fingers]. It was like a living organism that we were shooting simultaneously. We agreed that we had to

THE FACELESS ONES

Masking up in *Chapter 1*

This may be a whole new take on the Strangers but one thing remains reassuringly – no, terrifyingly – constant. The trio's masks are strictly faithful to the original movie and have lost none of their dead-eyed power to haunt your dreams. Did Harlin consider that nightmarish iconography just too sacred to change?

"There was definitely a conversation between me and the producers at the very beginning, and we immediately came to a conclusion," he tells *SFX*. "I said 'This is not the Bat-suit, this isn't something that should evolve over years or decades and become somehow different. The movie is called *The Strangers* and we should be absolutely faithful to the original masks, to the best of our ability, because that's what our iconic killers are, and there's no reason to modernise or change it.'

"When I did *A Nightmare On Elm Street 4* and *Die Hard 2*, we used the term 'replicating the experience', which is not copying the experience but replicating it. We want to give the audience the same sense of things they felt and experienced, and why they enjoyed that movie.

"For me there was no reason to say, 'We're going to make the design bigger or better or different, just because we can.' No reason. The reason is to give the original fans something they can relate to, and give the new audience, who might know nothing about the original, something that is strong and iconic.

"We're not a sequel, but in terms of sequels it's like if Freddy all of a sudden had a totally different sweater or Bruce Willis was not a working class cop in *Die Hard 2* but was now a businessman. There are certain things that I don't think you want to touch."

check on each other every day. We had this reality police between us, always.

"Sometimes it's 'kill your darlings' by taking out something that looks really awesome but starts feeling like a movie instead of feeling like we are documenting. Of course it's a movie, and it's not meant to look like a reality show but still, the tone was extremely important. The reality, the darkness, the hopelessness, the randomness and the violent nature.

"What I think will be really interesting is the exploration of Madelaine's character," Harlin continues. "How she changes as a result of this relentless violence that follows her, that she doesn't seem able to escape from. It's really a study of what happens to an ordinary person, with a full life ahead of them, and everything looking really positive, when they encounter something that can't help but change their life forever.

"Madelaine did an amazing job and I had a field day telling that story. Instead of your usual hour and a half thriller, two hours max, you have four and a half hours to explore it."

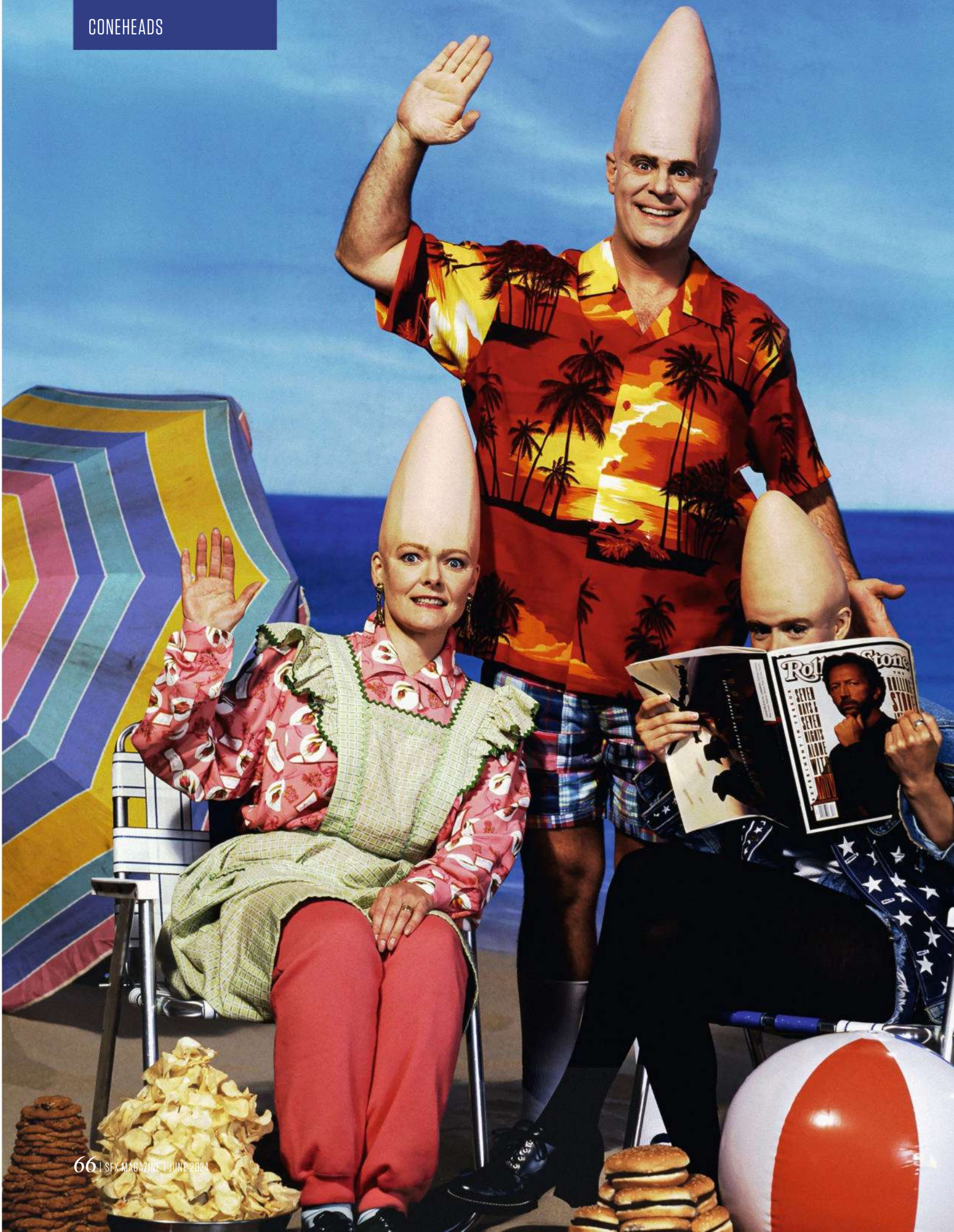
Crucial to this sense of verisimilitude is the secluded Oregon home that serves as the blood-spattered crucible of *Chapter 1*. You imagine it won't be part of an Airbnb promo campaign any time soon.

"There's nothing gothic about these movies," Harlin stresses. "Let's face it, there's been a ton of movies where they buy a new house and there's something under the floorboards or some ghost that appears. Even if they look like modern structures, they tend to be very gothic in their feel. That's a tradition of horror movies.

"This place seems kind of quaint, very normal. It's cosy, almost a little romantic. There's a fireplace and a warm feeling and it looks like there's a nice forest around it. I never wanted to make it feel like, 'Oh my god, it's a scary house, don't walk in!' No, it looks like a totally reasonable place to rent, in the kind of town any of us have driven through, where we've stopped to get gas or taken a little side road. This Airbnb has to feel like it belongs there, and there's nothing wrong with spending a night there.

"When that safety and normalcy is broken by somebody knocking on your door and then starting to gain access to your space, it turns into a house of horrors. I always say that there are two scenarios. There's an extraordinary place where relatively normal things happen, but because it's an extraordinary place it turns into something spectacular. Then there's a totally normal place but the events that happen to you are extraordinary, and this is definitely the latter!"

The Strangers: Chapter 1 is out on 17 May.


Rolling Stone
SEVEN
ALIVE &
SEVEN
NIGHTS
ALONE
WITH

E.T. CONE HOME

AS **CONEHEADS** TURNS 30, COMEDY LEGEND DAN AYKROYD DISCUSSES ITS UNLIKELY RELEVANCE, AND TELLS US WHY BELDAR IS HIS ALL-TIME FAVOURITE ROLE

WORDS: **SIMON BLAND**

FORGET ALL THOSE UFO WHISTLEBLOWERS and their tantalising stories of alien visitations. It turns out humanity's first contact with extraterrestrials actually took place three decades ago – on-screen at least. Landing in 1993, *Coneheads* finally gave Dan Aykroyd and Jane Curtin's classic *Saturday Night Live* comedy sketch the big-screen treatment more than 25 years after the characters first appeared on American TV.

The movie followed Beldar (Aykroyd) and Prymaat (Curtin), a Conehead couple from the distant planet Remulak who accidentally get stranded on Earth. With a while to wait before a rescue vessel can reach them (seven zerls in Remulak years), the pair are forced to infiltrate human culture and assimilate into sleepy suburban America. Despite their obvious visible differences (if anyone asks, they're from France), the pair soon grow to love their new lives, welcoming daughter Connie (Michelle Burke) into the world and embracing the American dream in the process.

"I feel like an alien creature on this planet," admits Aykroyd, explaining how his links to Beldar run to an almost biological level. Despite playing a host of icons throughout his career – from a Blues Brother to a Ghostbuster – it's Beldar who he cites as his all-time favourite role. "I'm one of the few people who is a →

CONE-TINUATION

Dan Aykroyd ponders the future adventures of Beldar Clorhone

From a follow-up to *The Blues Brothers* and numerous *Ghostbusters* sequel scripts, Aykroyd is no layabout when it comes to developing new adventures for his fan-favourite characters. With that in mind, it may not come as a surprise to learn that the idea of a *Coneheads* sequel has crossed his mind over the years.

"I could see Beldar going into politics and getting elected into office; dealing with the whole concept of immigration and how people work hard to make it in a strange land," he tells *SFX*, highlighting one potential idea. "Maybe the story revolves around the Coneheads coming back to re-invade Earth and I have to stop the invasion. I would definitely do another one if we could come up with a story, and I know Jane [Curtin] would come back too."

Jane Curtin, Michelle Burke and Dan Aykroyd.

Heterochromia-Syndactyly, meaning I have two different colour eyes and webbed toes in the middle of both feet. Therefore, I consider myself a physical alien," he reasons. "Also, having been born in Canada, I'm a resident alien of the United States and when I'm in that country I relate to the system and people there as being an 'alien' – so I'm very attached to Beldar."

Capitalising on the surprise success of fellow *SNL* movie *Wayne's World* a year earlier, the film's writers Bonnie and Terry Turner partnered with Aykroyd and Tom Davis, the writers who originated the original Coneheads sketch in 1977, in the hope of capturing similar box office magic. Despite not reaching the financial heights achieved by Wayne and Garth following its July 1993 release, *Coneheads* delivered something unexpectedly resonant that has since emerged as one of the most wholesome comedies of its decade.

"Davis and I came up with the original draft. We were more orientated around a UFO chase adventure story," Aykroyd tells *SFX*. "It was really Bonnie and Terry who came into the writing process and infused it with the loving heart that the film had. Once they proposed the ideas for developing the characters and the relationship between Beldar, Prymaat and their daughter, we fully embraced it.

"Not that it wasn't there before," he adds. "In those original *Saturday Night Live* scenes it was always a close-knit family, but Bonnie and Terry were able to enhance it quite beautifully and humanise the Coneheads."

While *SNL*'s original Connie Conehead, Laraine Newman, had aged out of the role by the time the film arrived (she cameos during its Remulak-set finale), elements of Aykroyd and Davis's core story remained in the final film.

Shortly after Beldar and Prymaat arrive on Earth, they're tailed by a tenacious immigration agent named Gorman (Michael McKean) and his brown-nosing lackey Eli (David Spade) pretty much until the movie reaches its climax on Remulak. However, by emphasising a more grounded family element of an otherwise alien story, *Coneheads* ended up with lashings of cockle-warming heart.

As if that wasn't enough, propping up this touching tale of a burgeoning family unit were underlying themes of migration and acceptance. Throughout the film's 88-minute runtime, we watch as Beldar and Prymaat go from pointy-headed outsiders to hardworking immigrants, who are ultimately welcomed with warm smiles and open arms from almost everyone they meet along the way.

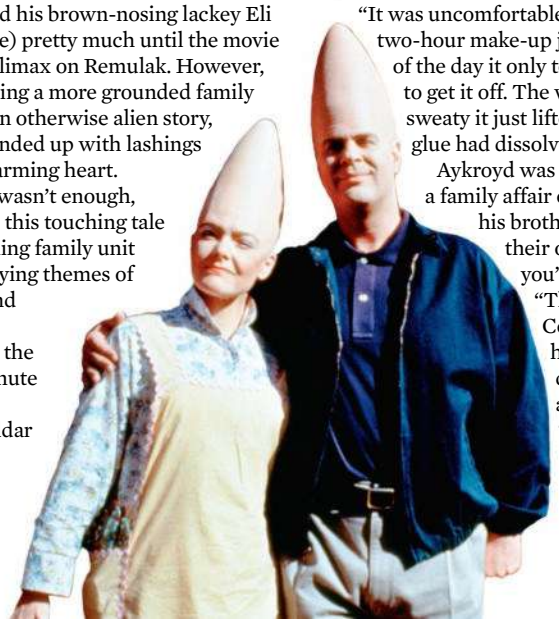
"Everybody wants to come to America, no matter how they get there," says Aykroyd, commenting on an element of the movie that still echoes in today's society.

"Sometimes they keep their rituals, as Beldar and Prymaat did with their mating," he adds, referencing a scene where the duo utilise mysterious alien "pleasure spools" in the bedroom. "[However] once they settle in and truly assimilate, they become part of the culture and the fabric of society. That's what Beldar and Prymaat were doing, becoming American."

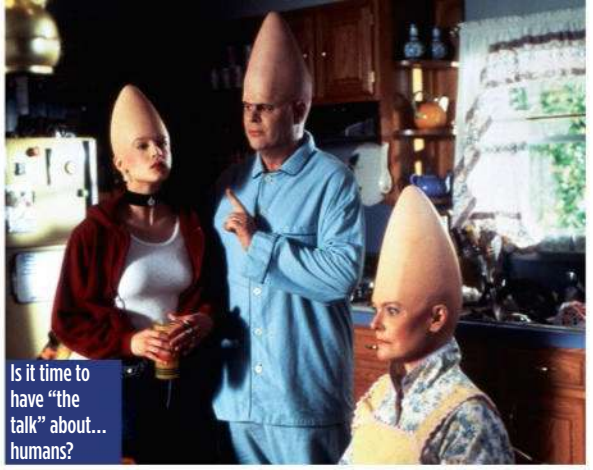
When it came to cone-structing their look, plenty had changed since Aykroyd and Curtin had first played Coneheads on live TV in the late '70s. Still, it was far from a speedy process.

"It was uncomfortable. It was about a two-hour make-up job for me, but at the end of the day it only took about two minutes to get it off. The whole thing would be so sweaty it just lifted off easily because the glue had dissolved after shooting."

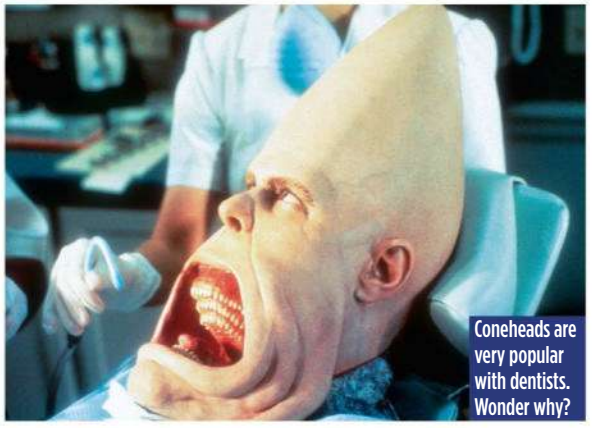
Aykroyd was keen to make the movie a family affair off-screen too, inviting his brother and father to don their own cones for blink-and-you'll-miss-them bit parts: "They play high-master Coneheads in the movie," he smiles. Even his eldest daughter Danielle made a brief appearance: "She's in the scene at the



PICTURES COURTESY ALAMY, GETTY



Is it time to have "the talk" about... humans?



Coneheads are very popular with dentists. Wonder why?

Beldar and Prymaat, just your average joes.

CLOSE CONE-TACT

What happened when John Belushi fanatic Chris Farley met Akyroyd?

With *Coneheads* acting as a spin-off film from a popular *Saturday Night Live* sketch, the show's creator and the movie's producer, Lorne Michaels, was keen to fill it with as many of his '90s *SNL* stars as he could. You'll see a wealth of funny faces make memorable cameo appearances, some bigger than others.

The late Chris Farley, a John Belushi fanatic, appears as Connie's mechanic boyfriend Ronnie, and didn't miss the opportunity to quiz Aykroyd about his former comedy partner. "I told him everything I could about John, along with all the warnings too, which ultimately went unheeded," he says, referring to how both Belushi and Farley died of drug overdoses aged 33. "He loved to hear stories about *The Blues Brothers*. He was a sweet, loving wonderful guy, he just had his problems."

beach with me, wearing a little cone. I remember she was just four years old and such a good sport about getting the cone on."

A self-professed UFO expert ("I've personally seen four of them," he claims), there was one story element that Aykroyd was particularly keen on including in the Coneheads' leap to the big screen, something that couldn't be adequately captured on telly. "I'm glad that, in the end, we took the journey to Remulak," he admits.

"There was a mixed view from the other writers about going there, but I felt we had to go and see where they lived, where they came from and why they were the way they were." Does Remulak mirror what he thinks alien worlds might actually be like? "Well, of course we don't know, but one can imagine that life on Remulak under the Moons of Meepthor might be as idyllic as we depicted it in the film," ponders Aykroyd.

"Except, of course, having to fight the Garthok which every male must go through as a rite of passage," he smiles, recalling the movie's climactic battle between Beldar and a toothy alien beast that's ultimately bested by his Earth-learned golf skills.

"That's not so great, but the gelatinous pools, triple moons and beauty of the planet, that's what we were trying to get across."

Coneheads also introduced the world to a number of alien phrases. For a generation who grew up with the movie, mum and dad became "Parental Units" while those same parents suddenly found themselves with unruly "Young Ones". It's something that's become part of Aykroyd's own personal life: "Throughout the raising of my children, I've also used 'respect your parental units' and 'you young ones should smarten up.' Whenever we sit down to dinner, it's always 'consuming mass quantities' – so I use them myself."

While the film didn't beam up a record-breaking amount of cash, it remains one of Ackroyd's favourite filmmaking experiences. "What stands out for me is just the satisfaction and joy of playing that character and feeling close to it," he says. "It was just so natural for me to do. Even though the walk, voice, attitude and facial expressions are stilted, I put them on like a mantle. No other part gave me that."

Coneheads is on Prime Video.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

MANDA SCOTT

The acclaimed writer tells us why she writes "thrutopian" fiction

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Faith Tilleray

BEFORE SHE BEGAN WORK ON HER NEW novel, Manda Scott thought she had "stopped writing". She was busy with other projects and, more importantly, had a sense of urgency about the state of the world that didn't square with the convoluted business of getting a book to market.

"It seemed that the publishing cycle took too long," she says. "Humanity is in a bus heading towards the edge of a cliff – and we might be over the cliff, I thought, before a book was actually out. Or at least the window within which we can turn away from the cliff might have gone. So I was doing other stuff."

By this, she means she had become a podcaster: the host of *Accidental Gods*, which is concerned with creating a better future. She had also been busy teaching an online course in "thrutopias", narratives that offer route-maps to a world we would be proud to pass on to future generations. Add in her commitments as a smallholder and a teacher of shamanic dreaming, and she was just plain busy.

So what changed? What inspired Scott to write *Any Human Power*? The key lies in Scott's own belief system. "The fundamentals of shamanic practice are that this reality – four dimensions, three dimensions and time – is a very tiny fraction of all possible reality," she says, "and that with training it is possible to depart this reality and enter into sections of other realities at will, in order to ask for help."

As Scott tells it, putting these beliefs into practice can be demanding. Mostly, she says, shamanic work results in getting "nudges" about what to do, nudges that need interpretation – though sometimes you get "clear text" that has to be acted upon.

MOMENT OF TOOTH

In the summer of 2021, Scott received the message that she should bind a "30,000-year-old fossilised horse tooth" to a tree and sit with her back to it "in a particular frame of mind" for an hour at sunset. "Within a week I had the outline of this book," she says. Her job then became to write it.

Most novels, it's safe to say, don't arise in this manner, but you really don't need to share Scott's beliefs to enjoy the book, which follows Lan, an anthropologist, into "the Beyond". From here, she keeps an eye on her extended family, including a granddaughter who gets caught up in an online furore that escalates in unexpected ways, and which results in an opportunity to reshape the world. In short, the book is a thrutopia. In Scott's estimation, we need to get past the idea of, say, *Game Of Thrones* as "a metaphor for climate change" or projecting forward from where we are and writing dystopias. "You cross *The Handmaid's Tale* with *The Road* and you get something you do not want your kids to live through," she says, making it clear that this isn't enough in itself. Equally, constructing far-future utopias isn't sufficient either. You have to give people "options" so that they can change their behaviours.

Writers and artists have a particular duty here, she thinks, because they can make the imaginative leaps necessary. When *SFX* mentions Kim Stanley Robinson, Scott says she sees him as a fellow traveller. However, she also adds, "*The Ministry For The Future* spoke to maintaining the existing power structures, but managing them differently. I think the nature of power has to change."

YAS QUEEN

In this context, it's telling that *Any Human Power* is prefaced by a 2014 quotation from Ursula K Le Guin, in which she spoke about how capitalism "seems inescapable", but that once upon a time "so did the divine right of kings". The grand dame of SFF added: "Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

A shorthand for Scott's beliefs would be – at the risk of oversimplifying – to describe them as deep green. "There's a way of thinking that is basically patriarchal, hierarchical, extractive, that we've all been brought up in," she says. "That hasn't changed much in recorded history, because the people keeping the records are the people who thought in this way." In her worldview, it's this way of thinking that we need to get past, towards something "regenerative".

Or perhaps it's a way of thinking to which we need to go back. Over a long career, Scott has also written thrillers, crime fiction and historical fiction. Boudica, whom she first wrote about in 2003's *Dreaming The Eagle*, is a figure to whom she's strongly drawn. For Scott, the warrior queen represents a figure from Britain's druidic – for which read shamanic – past.

"I have this theory that we're in the dying days of the Roman Republic now," she says. "It's taken 2,000 years, but basically it was Rome that brought us money and taxes and slavery, and patriarchy. They brought a trauma culture to a land that had an initiation culture [one rooted in initiation rites and a connection to nature] and they crushed it. But we don't have to live like that!"

Any Human Power is published by September on 30 May.

BIODATA

From **Glasgow**

Greatest Hits
Scott's previous novels include the *Rome* series of historical espionage thrillers, and *The Crystal Skull*, which features a mythic Mayan bonce.

Random Fact
Scott's shamanic beliefs are rooted in part in reading Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Eagle Of The Ninth* books as a child; it wasn't the Romans who fascinated Scott so much as the Celtic Britons.

> “I have this theory that we’re in the dying days of the Roman Republic now”

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edited by Ian Berriman

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ABIGAIL

Dancing with death

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 109 minutes

Directors **Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, Tyler Gillett**

Cast **Melissa Barrera, Dan Stevens, Kathryn Newton, Alisha Weir**

Radio Silence duo Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett delivered a great, witty horror movie set in a creepy mansion with *Ready Or Not* before moving to *Scream*-land. Their latest, fang-happy tale *Abigail*, could serve as a perfect double bill with that breakout thriller.

Set once again in a large, spooky (and in this case, locked down) house, it follows a group of criminals of varying ability and seriousness, who are gathered by a mysterious overseer (Giancarlo Esposito) for what they think should be a relatively easy payday. Their mission? Kidnap a wealthy man's daughter. There's just one issue: the victim is most certainly not what they were expecting.

Matilda's Alisha Weir gives great creep as the title character, a ballet-dancing baddie who mocks her victims before tearing into necks (and ripping heads off). But she's matched by the majority of the kidnap crew, who are more than simply human vampire treats.

Named after members of Frank Sinatra's Rat Pack (following the *Reservoir Dogs* method of using codenames so as not to compromise themselves), they're a quirky, watchable assortment. Dan Stevens continues his run of appealing, scruffy lowlifes, here playing a cop-turned-wrongdoer with a nice line in sarcasm. Melissa Barrera, who starred in the directors' *Scream* movies, is the beating heart and steel spine of the film. Kathryn Newton brings goofy, nervy energy to the role of "Sammy", and Kevin Durand is the lunkheaded "Peter", the brawn but not the brains of the outfit, who also has a vulnerable, childlike side (when not showing off his considerable strength). They're a supremely entertaining bunch, bickering amongst themselves in engaging fashion before the running and screaming starts.

> **"There's plenty to make you gasp and giggle as Abigail hunts"**

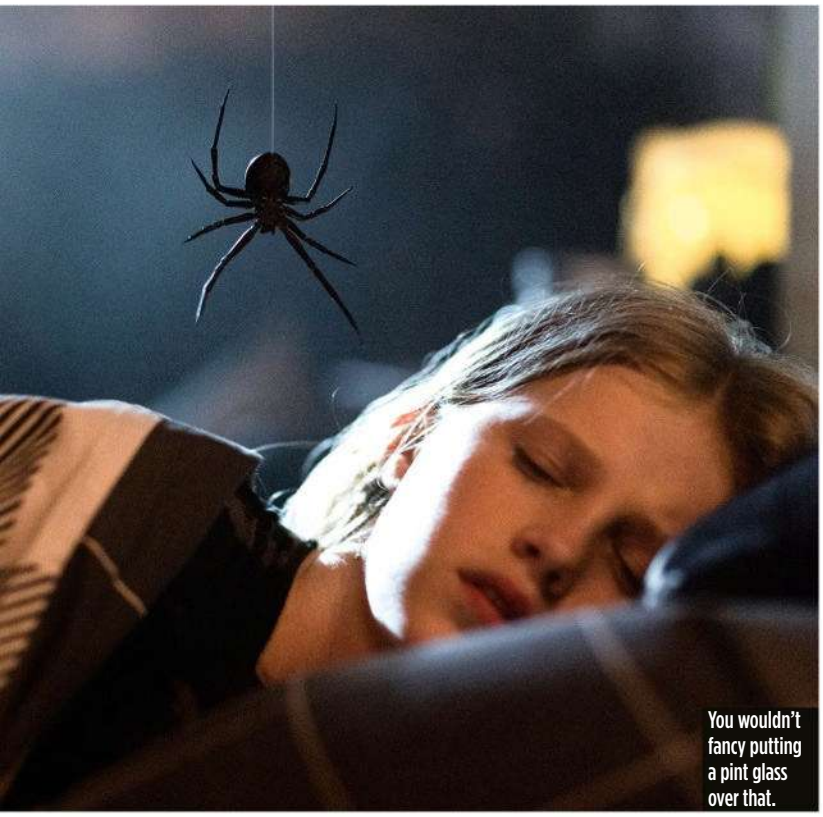
That element also doesn't let the side down, with buckets of claret flung effectively as the horror story takes over and our main characters start to drop like flies. Vampiric skills and lore are explored (and in one winning gag, well spoofed) along the way.

If there's an issue, it's that the story takes a more predictable, less inventive turn as it continues down the genre path. That said, there's still plenty to make you gasp and giggle as Abigail hunts her victims. And while – in the one major cliché – one of the characters manages to survive punishment that no human should be able to endure, it doesn't drain the value of the movie as a whole.

An undead delight with real teeth (and properly funny lines, delivered by people who know how to make them work), *Abigail* is a worthy, largely fresh addition to the vampire genre, which proves that, unleashed from the bounds of franchise filmmaking, Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett are no mere flukes.

James White

i Alisha Weir's dance training helped her on the stunt front – the filmmakers estimate that she did 95% of them herself.



You wouldn't fancy putting a pint glass over that.

STING

Flinch-y wince-y spider

★★★½☆

RELEASED 31 MAY
12A | 91 minutes
Director **Kiah Roache-Turner**
Cast **Jermaine Fowler, Ryan Corr, Penelope Mitchell, Alyla Browne**

Intergalactic arachnids are having a moment. Already this year, a friendly space spider has taught Adam Sandler life lessons (*Spaceman*); now its unrelated cousin is webbing up New Yorkers and devouring them for dinner.

In *Sting*'s brilliant opening five minutes, we witness the creature manipulating an elderly woman with Alzheimer's into bringing it fresh meat by waking her up; she calls the exterminator, the spider eats the exterminator, she forgets what happened, the spider wakes her up again, repeat.

It's an amusing cold open that mixes horror and humour but one that perhaps promises too much, as the film never quite hits those heights again.

Following this, writer/director Kiah Roache-Turner takes us back a few days, to when the beast was the size of a coin, and we discover how it came to haunt an apartment building. Turns out the spider was adopted by a teenage girl with parental issues, played by the impressive Alyla Browne.

The family's unhappy dynamic gives *Sting* an emotional core, one that offers a touch of Spielbergian charm, though the film also wears its *Alien* influences proudly. However, unlike Ridley Scott's horror, *Sting* ends up as an unserious, goofy scary space-spider flick.

Jack Shepherd

i The film's title was inspired by the chapter in *The Hobbit* where Bilbo Baggins fights giant spiders with his sword, Sting.

THE BEAST

No Feelings

★★★★☆

RELEASED 31 MAY
15 | 145 minutes
Director **Bertrand Bonello**
Cast **Léa Seydoux, George MacKay, Guslagie Malanda, Dasha Nekrasova**

Bertrand Bonello's *The Beast* is a snarling, sprawling enigma; unnerving in its foreboding atmosphere, compelling in its rich performances and elegant direction. It's loosely inspired by Henry James's 1903 novella *The Beast In The Jungle*, which is about a man who finds himself paralysed by the feeling that something terrible is going to happen to him.

Here, that anxiety haunts Gabrielle (the superb Léa Seydoux), who's from a near-future in which purging your emotions is a prerequisite to participating at the higher levels of society. Having decided to undergo the procedure, she's connected to a machine that plunges her into her past lives to "purify" her DNA.

In 1910, for instance, she is a married pianist living in Paris. It's here, in a sequence of sumptuous romance, that she falls in love with the charming Louis (George MacKay), who pops up time and again. In 2014 Los Angeles he takes on the role of an incel who has selected Gabrielle (here a struggling actor) as the first victim of a misogynistic murder spree.

MacKay is unsettling in this guise, his prior gentleness twisted into something visceral and disturbing. The two lives serve as a knotty meditation on the extremities of emotion, particularly in terms of desire. Can you have the euphoric highs of love without the crushing lows? Aren't these passions, for good or ill, what being alive is all about? It is a question seemingly answered in the year 2044, in which most of humanity appear indistinguishable from humanoid machines. The film is, at times, too fragmented for its own good, too meandering and indirect. Yet there are stirring ideas on display here – about love, about human nature, about the creeping dread of the unfeeling machines – executed with panache. **Stephen Kelly**

> **"A snarling, sprawling enigma, unnerving in its atmosphere"**

"Quickly, my love, to the piano forte we go!"

i The late Gaspard Ulliel was originally cast as Louis. Bonello recast the role with a non-French actor to avoid comparisons.

Reviews

CINEMA

LA CHIMERA

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 131 minutes

Director **Alice Rohrwacher**

Cast **Josh O'Connor, Isabella Rossellini, Carol Duarte, Vincenzo Nemolato**

The Italian director Alice Rohrwacher has a penchant for magical realism. It was there in her 2018 film *Happy As Lazzaro*, in which mundanity and folklore intertwined, and it is here in the wonderfully Fellini-esque *La Chimera*, in which an English archaeologist called Arthur (Josh O'Connor) possesses the ability to sense ancient tombs.

It is not a gift he uses for study, however. Instead, he leads a band of squabbling Italian grave-robbers, who make their money by selling rare Etruscan artefacts – left as tributes for the dead – on the black market.

Set in the '80s, the film has a dreamy, meandering quality, befitting the grieving Arthur's shapeless life. He robs graves. He drinks. He visits Flora (the great Isabella Rossellini), the mother of the woman he lost. He strikes up a relationship with Italia (Carol Duarte), a terrible singer in search of a home. He robs graves. He drinks.

However, do not mistake meandering for dull; under Rohrwacher's command, this is filmmaking at its most vibrant and playful. One scene, for instance, is sped up to resemble a silent comedy; in another, a character breaks the fourth wall to talk about Etruscan history. This is life, after all: where grief and farce dance together, often with no rhyme or reason.

Stephen Kelly

IN FLAMES

★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 MAY

15 | 97 minutes

Director **Zarrar Kahn**

Cast **Ramesha Nawal, Omar Javaid, Bakhtawar Mazhar, Adnan Shah**

The era of so-called elevated horror has led to an abundance of metaphors, with many of its lesser entries inserting heavy-handed messaging where the real monster is the patriarchy, the immigration policies, white supremacy etc.

While it is easy to now roll your eyes when a horror film like *In Flames* wears its critique of gender dynamics so clearly on its sleeve, this Pakistani movie – the first to premiere at Cannes' Directors' Fortnight in over 40 years – has enough style and mastery of the genre to pull it off.

It follows Fariha (Bakhtawar Mazhar), a widow with two children living in Karachi, struggling to make ends meet, who's saddled with enormous debt when her father dies. Her daughter Mariam (Ramesha Nawal), a medical student, finds herself also under threat, faced with the death of a romantic interest and potentially having her future destroyed by the family's financial obligations.

Suffice to say, the world of these women is pretty horrifying long before the literal ghosts make their presence known... While *In Flames* is unlikely to keep audiences awake in terror at night, director Zarrar Kahn is a master of maintaining an unsettling, eerie atmosphere. And the film has plenty of twists and turns that keep it engaging, as well as politically astute.

Leila Latif

ISS

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 96 minutes

Director **Gabriela Cowperthwaite**

Cast **Ariana DeBose, Chris Messina, Pilou Asbæk, Masha Mashkova**

Space-faring scientists dealing with a politically thorny crisis on Earth is not a new concept – see 1984's *2010: The Year We Make Contact* for just one example. Yet like that sequel, *ISS* arrives at a time when the warlike tendencies feel all too real. Unfortunately for the new film, nothing much else does.

Ariana DeBose stars as Dr Kira Foster, a new arrival boarding the titular space station, which initially appears to be a model of cooperation and humanity reaching for something better. Foster is there to conduct experiments on rats, and unfortunate zero-gravity-influenced carnage among her subjects is just one unsubtle nod at what is to come, as tensions erupt into war down below and the Russian and US governments demand that their respective astronauts take control.

Director Gabriela Cowperthwaite and writer Nick Shafir set up a decently compelling situation but then let it devolve into paranoid melodrama, which not even the talents a cast including Chris Messina and Pilou Asbæk can hold together for long.

Like the station starting to fall from orbit, this one threatens to plunge to ludicrous levels of moral hand-wringing and shifty behaviour on both sides. It's less space oddity and more give us some space from these annoying astro-nuts.

James White

SCARYGIRL

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 91 minutes

Directors **Ricard Cussó, Tania Vincent**

Cast **Sam Neill, Anna Torv, Tim Minchin, Jillian Nguyen**

You'd expect the message of this Australian animation (based on a 2012 videogame) to be "it's okay to be different", given that heroine Arkie (Jillian Nguyen) sports an eyepatch, weird stitches and tentacles. And yes, at one point she does come to terms with her strange looks... but it's easy to miss that bit when there's so much else going on in its absolute disaster of a screenplay.

We land in a world that's being terrorised by an evil human scientist, Dr Maybee (Sam Neill), who's draining the sun of its light. He desperately needs the magical healing powers belonging to a giant octopus, Blister (Rob Collins), and sends out bounty hunters to find him. When her pa is octo-napped, Blister's daughter Arkie sets off on a quest to bring him home and save her planet.

Charming production design and cute characters (including some adorable lightbulb-bees!) are coupled with a cheerful voice cast, who really do their best. It's not enough, though: it's hard to contend with the film's disjointed plot, which dumps huge piles of over-complicated exposition and still leaves questions unanswered.

Was the movie always this confusing, or was it butchered in the edit? It's still a sweet little adventure, but expect to be bombarded with questions from more demanding kids after the credits roll. **Jayne Nelson**

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DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **Original Jason opens another door in the corridor.**
- **There's a reference to Erwin Schrödinger.**

- **We see the sign of Jason's favourite bar, The Village Tap.**
- **Somebody says the word "ampoules".**
- **Original Jason punches someone.**
- **Jason 2 screws something up while trying to fit in.**
- **We meet a different version of Jason's wife.**

DARK MATTER

Thinking inside the box

★★★★☆

UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now, Wednesdays**

Creator **Blake Crouch**

Cast **Joel Edgerton, Jennifer Connelly, Alice Braga, Jimmi Simpson**

EPISODES 1.01-1.09 **Ever felt like you** are your own worst enemy? Be grateful you're not physics professor Jason Dessen (Joel Edgerton), for whom that is literally the case.

Based on a 2016 novel by *Wayward Pines* creator Blake Crouch – who also acts as the lead writer here – it's a popular thriller take on quantum mechanics. Don't worry: once you've grasped the basic concept, you won't be required to stretch your brain too much.

Abducted by a masked figure, Dessen wakes up to find himself in a facility that's home to a large cube which, once entered, can place a human in superposition – existing simultaneously in more than one place – thereby allowing travel between alternate realities. Its creator: another Jason Dessen – who, regretting his life choices, has now taken his counterpart's place, stealing the wife and son he never had. What a rotter.

While the concept may seem to offer a showcase for an actor's versatility, to be honest there isn't much difference between OG Jason and Jason 2; the latter is slightly more hard-edged, but you'll be grateful for the fact that OG Jason has a cut on his nose... Neither is the series likely to inspire philosophical musings. While it plays around with ideas such as what makes a person who they are, the emotional throughline of Jason's desperation to be reunited with his family always takes precedence.

> **"A series with multiple killer cliffhangers, and effective twists"**

Although multiverse tales probably peaked in popularity two years ago, *Dark Matter* doesn't feel old hat. The concept is put to better use than fan-pleasing team-ups, and it's elegantly thought-through, unpacked in a way that's logical and intriguing.

When you enter the cube and take the drug needed to facilitate its use, the interior switches to an infinite corridor lined with doors – a strong visual hook. Jason's exploration of how exactly a traveller might navigate the multiverse (initially a mystery) proves interesting too. Don't expect anything too outlandish – you can only visit an Earth you were born into, so there are no *Sliders*-esque worlds where, say, dinosaurs walk among us. Usually the differences are environmental, with Chicago flooded, frozen or transformed into forest.

It's a series with multiple killer cliffhangers, and some effective twists. Jason 2 soon finds out that faking 15 years of marriage has its difficulties, but OG Jason hasn't fully thought through all the implications of his actions either – something which bites him in the ass in the last two episodes, in a very entertaining escalation.

Given its infinite nature, there's obviously potential for further investigation of this fictional universe – but we kinda hope it doesn't happen. Adapting Crouch's novel in full, *Dark Matter* makes for a satisfyingly self-contained whole. **Ian Berriman**

i The titles displayed on a cinema marquee include *Summer Frost* and *Upgrade* – both novels by Blake Crouch.

ORPHAN BLACK: ECHOES Season One

Not-so-fine print

★★★☆☆

UK **ITVX, streaming from 16 May**

Creator **Anna Fishko**

Cast **Krysten Ritter, Keeley Hawes, Amanda Fix, Rya Kihlstedt**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **Hands up,** *Orphan Black* fans who heard about this and thought, "It'll suck without Tatiana Maslany!" You were almost right. *Orphan Black* was a decent sci-fi series elevated to legend status by Maslany's extraordinary multiple performances. *Orphan Black: Echoes* is just a decent sci-fi series.

That's not to diminish the still-formidable talents of the cast here, however – most notably Keeley Hawes. With the show set 40-odd years in the future, she plays Kira, the grown-up daughter of clone Sarah, who's perfected 3D-printing organs to heal people. She's also figured out how to print full humans – as Lucy (Krysten Ritter) discovers after waking up with no memory in her lab.

Thus the stage is set for a show that plays with more than one version of an individual, but printed out at different ages, so you don't need Maslany-level performances and digital doubles; you just have multiple (excellent) actors who look a bit like Ritter.

> **"The stakes are much lower than they were for the original series"**

It's the arc plot that lets the show down. The stakes are much lower than they were for the original series, so it's hard to care as much, even as you start to love the characters.

The story also needs a compelling bad guy – while the original's Dyad Institute was a sprawling mega-evil, the dodgy billionaire here is yawn-worthy.

Imagine the cost of human-printing ink.

A second season hasn't been confirmed, but it will be no great loss if *Echoes* ends up as a one-off. *Orphan Black*'s iconic biting wit and audacious plot twists just aren't here, leaving this not so much a clone but a faintly Xeroxed print-out. That said, Hawes really *is* superb. **Jayne Nelson**

i While Tatiana Maslany doesn't appear, there are cameos from two of the original show's actors in aged-up make-up.

DEAD BOY DETECTIVES Season One

Spirits of Mystery

★★★★☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Showrunners **Steve Yockey, Beth Schwartz**

Cast **Jayden Revri, George Rexstrew, Kassius Nelson, Yuyu Kitamura**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **When is a spin-off** not really a spin-off? When it's *Dead Boy Detectives*, a sparky, funny, odd show that started life as an offshoot from *Doom Patrol* before being reworked to fit into Netflix's *Sandman* universe.

It makes sense – the titular tecs were created as bit-part characters for a single issue of Neil Gaiman's masterpiece – but the links between the shows are few and far between. Tonally, *Dead Boy Detectives* sits somewhere between *Riverdale* and *Buffy*, with a dash of *The Hardy Boys*. Charles (Jayden Revri) and Edwin (George Rexstrew) are two ghosts who solve supernatural mysteries while trying to avoid being moved along to the afterlife by the Night Nurse (Ruth Connell).

Episode one introduces the team to young psychic Crystal (Kassius Nelson), who quickly becomes part of the team, as does shy Nico (Yuyu Kitamura). "The Case Of The Lighthouse Leapers" concerns a haunted lighthouse, while "The Case Of The Devlin House" involves a macabre time loop. Penultimate episode "The Case Of The Very Long Stairway" finally gives us some insight into how the boys met.

If anything happens to the cat, we *riot*.

While the show is mostly episodic, ongoing elements soon stack up. The season's arc follows evil witch Esther's machinations, but she never really feels like a threat, especially when the show also piles on Crystal's demonic ex, the mystery surrounding her family, a subplot about landlady Jenny the Butcher, and Edwin's entanglement with the louche Cat King, a shapeshifting trickster.

Sometimes, as in the episode with a giant talking mushroom, it's an overload of wacky.

For the most part, though, this is good-natured fun with a big heart. The core four have bags of chemistry, and there's potential for *Dead Boy Detectives* to grow into something special. **Will Salmon**

i The DBD debuted in *The Sandman* issue 25, before returning in crossover *The Children's Crusade*.

FALLOUT Season One

Nuked Kids On The Block

★★★★½

- UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**
- Showrunners **Geneva Robertson-Dworet, Graham Wagner**
- Cast **Ella Purnell, Aaron Moten, Walton Goggins, Moisés Arias**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **The much-**anticipated *Fallout* adopts the setting – though not any precise plot – of the videogame series which began in 1997. In 2077, an alternate version of Earth has developed where personal robots and rudimentary computers are commonplace, but where the culture is still firmly stuck in the '50s – and the Cold War has never gone away.

Inevitably the H-bomb is dropped, devastating the USA. Those who are rich enough retreat to underground Vaults, forever trapped in a kitsch retro-future, while in the irradiated Wasteland above, society bloodily re-evolves, *Mad Max*-style. Set 200 years later, season one tells the intertwined story of three main protagonists.

Perkily naïve Lucy (Ella Purnell) has a perfect life and is about to get married when her Vault is invaded by raiders. For reasons unknown, they're intent on kidnapping her father Hank (Kyle MacLachlan), the Vault's overseer. Lucy's main quest: to leave the Vault and search for Dad.

Meanwhile up top, Maximus (Aaron Moten) is a downtrodden Aspirant serving in the Brotherhood of Steel, an ambiguous, semi-religious group that reveres technology and whose members wear sodding great Power Armour suits. When a mission involving his "Knight" goes tits-up, Maximus surreptitiously inherits the suit, and soon crosses paths with Lucy.

Chasing them all is the Ghoul (Walton Goggins), one of the massively irradiated survivors of the original blast who have mutated into something more than human. In his former life he was B-movie actor Cooper Howard, famed for cheesy cowboy roles. Now he's an embittered, *extremely* sadistic and much feared bounty hunter, hired to track down a mysterious target.

The games are, particularly latterly, famed for their astoundingly graphic yet almost slapstick gore, and it's this that the series has most fun with. Episode one kicks things off with a bravado display of balletic violence as the raiders attack, and the action just gets ever more bonkers.

Lead director Jonathan Nolan earned his chops on *Westworld*, but *Fallout* is an altogether less serious affair, embracing the games' dark humour and juxtaposition of '50s can-do with the abject misery of the Wasteland and its mutated wildlife. The sumptuous visual design is spot-on, aping the series' distinctive clutter down to the last tiny Bobblehead. Shot on 35mm film, there's a pleasing graininess to the picture which echoes the time period.

> "A bravado display of balletic violence"

Over the course of eight episodes, including a rug-pull finale, pre-war flashbacks and the unfolding mystery of Vault 33 keep the action from becoming too relentless. You can wryly appreciate the implied critique of capitalism and greed if you like, or you can just watch heads being blown off. With season two commissioned, it'll be interesting to see if the TV version has the staying power of the game series. For now: thumbs up. **Ed Ricketts**

This is how we look the day after print deadline.

i The activation code in the last episode (101097) is a nod to the release date of the first *Fallout* game (10 October 1997).

STAR WARS: TALES OF THE EMPIRE

★★★★☆

- UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**
- Creator **Dave Filoni**
- Cast **Diana Lee Inosanto, Meredith Salenger, Lars Mikkelsen, Jason Isaacs**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 ***Tales Of The Jedi***'s six shorts plugged a few gaps in the backstories of Count Dooku and Ahsoka Tano. This follow-up series repeats the trick for a pair of slightly less familiar Force-wielders, and is arguably more satisfying.

The first is Morgan Elsbeth, the Nightsister who helped Grand Admiral Thrawn escape his exile in *Ahsoka*. All set before her previous screen appearances, this is a story of good intentions turned bad amid the rise of the Empire's.

The better half of the anthology focuses on Barriss Offee, the Padawan who framed Ahsoka in *The Clone Wars*, and whose fate has been the subject of fevered fan speculation ever since. Her journey in the wake of Order 66 is a compelling tale of Inquisitors and questions of faith, and benefits from the fact her ultimate destiny is unknown. (Without going into spoiler territory, there is a neat symmetry to the two characters' arcs.)

The Clone Wars, *Rebels* and *Ahsoka* mastermind Dave Filoni wrote all six episodes, and his fingerprints are all over this wonderfully crafted companion piece. Through this versatile format, Disney may have discovered the ideal way to explore obscure regions of *Star Wars* lore; a screen version of '90s book *Tales From Jabba's Palace*, please. **Richard Edwards**

CHASER

Run away!

★☆☆☆☆

UK **Prime Video, streaming now**

Creator **Daniel Roemer**

Cast **Russ Russo, Gia Bay, Daniel de Weldon, Haley Noel Bedocs**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **First things first:** nobody ever deliberately sets out to make a bad TV show. Everyone involved has tried so hard to breathe life into their art, from the writer to the actors to the hair stylist. And so, as we embark upon giving *Chaser* a good old kicking, know that we're sad about it... although not *that* sad, given that we still had to sit through the bloody thing.

Our "hero", Eddi, played by an unforgivably mumbly Russ Russo, is a film editor trying to revive his career while pining for the woman of his dreams, Anabel (Gia Bay). He's so gormless that once, while talking to her, he actually looks at her chest and then says "boobs" out loud. Folks, she's just a pair of breasts to him! Ha ha ha, isn't that funny?

Anyway, Eddi's computer breaks, so he calls an IT helpline and is suddenly given the power to edit *real life*. He does so, with predictable results: he plays the stock markets, buys a fast car and gets the girl.

Meanwhile Anabel's abusive boyfriend, Gar (Daniel de Weldon), is out for blood. There's also some jaw-droppingly unnecessary tosh about an old Native American guy and a glowing crystal MacGuffin.

"The runtime is padded by confusing dream sequences"

"Hey, who's this topless guy who looks just like me?"

What we have here, then, is a time-travel movie where someone "edits" instead of travels. And boy, have we seen it all before. Despite only having enough plot for two episodes, this somehow stretches out for eight (thankfully, all of them are under 30 minutes).

The runtime is padded by confusing dream sequences which repeatedly re-use scenes we've just watched, or – astonishingly! – spoil later ones. The actors noticeably struggle with the lousy script. Most ironically, given the premise, the editing is terrible: many scenes contain dead air.

It's torture to sit through. In a similar situation, we'd simply edit *Chaser* out of existence – it's what it deserves. **Jayne Nelson**

i For a masterclass in hilariously bad editing, watch "Bohemian Rhapsody's Terrible Editing – A Breakdown" on YouTube.

THEM: THE SCARE

LAPD Story

★★★½☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**

Creator **Little Marvin**

Cast **Deborah Ayorinde, Pam Grier, Luke James, Joshua J Williams**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **TV's most** difficult-to-google anthology show returns after a three-year absence with a continued focus on African-American characters and plotting that weds the supernatural to the unpleasant reality of racism. Though a late-stage surprise connects the two seasons, you can enjoy *The Scare* as a standalone.

The migration of black families into white neighbourhoods in the '50s was the background of the first series; here it's the 1991 beating of Rodney King by members of the LAPD, whose later acquittal led to widespread rioting. Deborah Ayorinde (previously the mum of the Emory family) is again our lead, this time facing bigotry within the force as Dawn Reeve, a detective assigned to a bizarre murder case: a foster mother crammed into the cupboard under her sink, multiple bones broken.

Elsewhere, we follow Edmund Gaines (Luke James), a wannabe actor struggling to find work and self-esteem. These plot threads proceed independently, generating mystery as we wonder how the characters might be connected.

Flinging several red herrings at us along the way, it's a stylishly shot series, with a couple of particularly impressive sequences. A neatly choreographed one sees Reeve chasing a suspect through multiple houses; another plays a clever game of bait and switch regarding the time frame.

Free from the shocking brutality of season one, castigated by some as "trauma porn", *The Scare* undeniably leaves a less powerful impression as a result. What does linger is James's performance. There's a supernatural presence here, but what's really terrifying is seeing Edmund – who, with his Kid 'N Play-esque hi-top fade and earnest enthusiasm, initially seems charming – teetering on the edge of insanity as his jealousy and sense of injustice bubble over.

Making a bobble hat: harder than it looks.

One final grouse: a good five minutes of the finale are so gloomy that it's practically impossible to see any of what's going on. Producers and directors, please try and remember that your work isn't always viewed in 100% optimal screening-room conditions.

Ian Berriman

i Back in 2011, Luke James appeared alongside Beyoncé in the video for "Run The World (Girls)".

PLANET OF THE VAMPIRES

Super Mario World

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 27 MAY

1965 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Mario Bava**

Cast **Barry Sullivan, Norma Bengell, Ángel Aranda, Evi Marandi**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Though it would be** foolish to overstate the influence of this Italian sci-fi – it did *not* inspire a wave of outer-space adventures filmed at Cinecittà Studios – in one respect, it had very significant reverberations, being a key precursor of *Alien*.

Though he was an SF fan (who directed Italy's first sci-fi movie), Mario Bava is better known for his gothic horrors. While *Planet Of The Vampires* takes off into space, any fan could instantly identify it as his work, just from the lighting, which often packs red, blue, green and purple into the same frame.

Planet Of The Zombies would be a more apt title. The story sees two spaceships pulled down to an alien planet. On arrival, the crew of the Argos (try to put tiny Biros out of your mind) violently turn against one another. Some force on this world is capable of possessing people when they're asleep or unconscious – or dead.

At one point our heroes discover a derelict alien spaceship, and what remains of its crew: two giant, monstrous skeletons...

"Er, everyone? I think the kitchen's on fire."

Sound familiar? *Alien* screenwriter Dan O'Bannon later confessed to the pinch.

It's the atmosphere that's the main draw. Bava makes a lot from very little – the planet surface set amounts to a few jutting spurs of faintly octopoid rock, dry ice and a lot of sand, but Bava renders it an oppressively ominous space. The costuming is a triumph too, the astronauts kitted out in black leather spacesuits with high collars vaguely reminiscent of Dracula's cloak. Sequences of corpses rising from their graves, bursting out of plastic wrapping, are impressively creepy.

The script has its flaws: the crew are frustratingly slow to wise up to what's going on, and the possessing lifeforms' plan makes little sense. And the production values sometimes let the film down – especially its planet surface miniatures. Nevertheless, it remains a gloriously stylish slice of interstellar gothic.

Extras This Radiance release offers three edits: the Italian version, and two US cuts (one featuring an alternate score used on '80s releases). Five film historians team up for a chin stroking-fest (41 minutes), trying to convince us both that the film is related to the Korean War, and that it inspired *The Clangers*. Er, no. A 2022 interview with Bava's son Lamberto, the film's third AD (13 minutes), has some useful insights. Tim Lucas, author of the definitive book on Bava, provides a seamless, incredibly well-informed commentary (dating from 2014). A reconstruction of the cutdown Super 8 version (17 minutes) seems a tad pointless.

> **"It's the atmosphere that's the main draw"**

Plus: two *Trailers From Hell* segments; the trailer itself; a gallery of 48 images. The package also includes an 80-page book, Renato Pestriniero's original short story "One Night Of 21 Hours", and six postcards. **Ian Berriman**

i According to actor Norma Bengell, Bava often brought his Basset Hounds on-set – which peed in the cast's space boots.

WILLIAM SHATNER: YOU CAN CALL ME BILL

★★★★☆

RELEASED 27 MAY

2024 | 12 | Blu-ray/download

Director **Alexandre O Philippe**

Given that documentarian Alexandre O Philippe's recent subjects include William Friedkin and David Lynch, it may seem surprising that he's produced a feature-length portrait of William Shatner. However much sci-fi fans adore him, the man who rapped "Rocket Man" is generally not considered a *serious* figure.

You Can Call Me Bill does its best to shift the dial on that by getting "behind the masks" of an actor who, at 93, is inescapably close to the exit – something whose proximity seems to have made him willing to show a little vulnerability.

Shatner's quasi-mystical view of the interconnectedness of all things, expounded here at some length, may raise a Spockian eyebrow – this *is* James T Kirk, right, not one of the hippies from "The Way To Eden"? The most surprising and affecting chapter, however, sees Shatner musing on loneliness, going so far as to confess that he's "Never had a real friend". Along the way, Shatner clips from TV shows, films and ads are wittily used to echo his words.

Could Philosophical Shatner and Emotionally Open Shatner be yet more masks? It's always possible, but the Bill we hear from here certainly seems genuine. You come away feeling that you know the living, breathing man beneath the pop culture icon patina rather better. **Ian Berriman**

RIDDLE OF FIRE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 12A | SVOD

Director **Weston Razooli**

Cast **Skyler Peters, Phoebe Ferro, Charlie Stover, Lio Tipton**

ICON **Imagine Wes Anderson** tackling one of Ray Bradbury's most sweet-natured stories and you might just grasp the spirit of this oddball indie.

It's shot on Kodak 16mm film, a statement of intent that earns its own standalone credit in the titles. Not only does this bestow a hipster-friendly aesthetic but those faded colours and grainy haze feel like a canny choice for a film intent on capturing the private universe of children, like a postcard from a half-memory.

The slim, whimsical story finds three kids on a mission, searching the Wyoming countryside for a speckled egg needed for the perfect blueberry pie recipe. Along the way they encounter the Enchanted Blade Gang, led by a witchy, gun-packing Lio Tipton, who's more Manson Family than Brothers Grimm.

Is she a genuine sorceress? The film plays coy when it comes to its fantastical elements, content to map fairy tale parallels over the backwoods odyssey of its scrappy, bike-riding heroes. Again, it's a smart reflection of how kids process the world through the lens of imagination.

The young leads are endearing, but at nearly two slackly paced hours much of the film's easy charm dissipates and the amateur vibe begins to grate. It's easy to feel like you're trapped watching endless home movies of someone else's kids.

Nick Setchfield

"Say hello to my little friends... Jeff and Stella."

REBEL MOON – PART TWO: THE SCARGIVER

Battle Between The Yawns

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 12 | SVOD

Director **Zack Snyder**

Cast **Sofia Boutella, Ed Skrein, Michiel Huisman, Elise Duffy**

NETFLIX **The best that can be said** of Zack Snyder's pompous space opera sequel is that it's trying not to be just more of the same. Unfortunately, it *is* the same in all the ways that made the first film such a joyless slog – including Snyder's much-derided use of slow motion (and, indeed, slow motion shots that get *even slower* motion), which he must surely be employing out of sheer bloody-mindedness by now.

As everyone knows by now, *Rebel Moon* is basically another retelling of *The Seven Samurai*. *Part One* was the planet-hopping mission to find a bunch of rebels to fight the bad guys. *Part Two* is the battle, as the rebels inspire the farmers to become a fighting force. Well, actually, the whole second hour is the battle. The first hour is made up of the recap, the "here's my tragic past" flashbacks, the training montage and the harvesting montage. Most of it in slow motion, most of it stupendously dull. The clumsy dialogue often feels like the actors are reading it for the first time.

The battle, to be fair, has some spectacular moments and exciting fight choreography. But it just grinds on and on and on. It's difficult to feel anything regarding any of the many deaths – despite bludgeoning attempts at poignancy, as if Snyder's grabbing you by the lapels and shouting, "Care, damn you!" in your face.

It ends up like the cinematic equivalent of a self-indulgent, overlong guitar solo on a prog rock concept album. Best watched while scrolling through your social media.

Dave Golder

i While filming his tunnel fight scenes, Ed Skrein was sent home with Covid, and the knackered stunt guys had two days off.

(4K X FOUR)

OLD MOVIES NOW AVAILABLE IN UHD

A man takes revenge on the doctors who separated him from his deformed conjoined twin in Frank Henenlotter's cult 1982 horror **BASKET CASE** (out now). Extras-wise, this Arrow Video release (an Arrow store exclusive) is a big upgrade on Second Sight's trilogy box set, adding a second commentary, six interview pieces, three shorts and more; it also comes with a poster and booklet. We said: "Has lost little of its raw power... A grotty low-fi gem full of bold ideas." Ahead of the reboot's release, why not revisit the original 1994 version of **THE CROW** (out now), in which a rock musician is resurrected to avenge his fiancee's death. The one brand new bonus here is a three-part design featurette. It comes with a poster and three postcards. We said: "Like one long flashily-edited MTV video – but a good one." In Guillermo del Toro's 2015 gothic romance **CRIMSON PEAK** (20 May), an author travels to her beloved's ancestral mansion, where she's visited by gruesome red ghosts. We said: "As decadent as a sofa crammed with giant, elaborately tasselled cushions... a film to luxuriate in." Extras from Arrow's 2019 Blu-ray are carried over; you also get a poster and four postcards. Finally, Jake Gyllenhaal keeps reliving the same eight minutes in Duncan Jones's **SOURCE CODE** (20 May), placed into the identity of a dead commuter to figure out who bombed a train. We said: "A movie with an indie spirit and blockbuster sensibilities... popcorn entertainment with genuine heft."

BUTCHER, BAKER, NIGHTMARE MAKER

Aunt Maniac

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1981 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **William Asher**

Cast **Jimmy McNichol, Susan Tyrrell, Bo Svenson, Marcia Lewis**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **If you sat John** Waters down and made him watch all 72 titles on the DPP list, this would surely be his fave. Featuring surely cinema's only deployment of Chekhov's *pickles*, it's by some distance the campest of the films to earn "video nasty" status.

An early gore gag secured that: when a couple's car runs into a lumber truck, a log knocks the driver's block off. Otherwise, it's bewildering to think that this is a film that was subject to seizure by the police – pitched at a hysterical level, it can't be taken seriously.

After coming home to find the aunt who raised him stabbing a TV repairman to death, young Billy (Jimmy McNichol) falls under suspicion from a cop whose vicious homophobia blinds him to the real explanation...

Bo Svenson is eminently hissable as a blockheaded bully who gets the comeuppance he richly deserves. Susan Tyrell, meanwhile, pulls out all the stops as the controlling Aunt Cheryl.

Words can't do justice to her performance, a spiralling into bug-eyed madness given shape through an increasingly twisted physicality. One of those films that has to be seen to be believed.

The kids' party version of *Macbeth* was a bit much.

Extras New interviews with Svenson (10 minutes), the DoP (15 minutes) and the editor (17 minutes) convey what a seat-of-the-pants production this was, due to the dismissal of the original director. Severin Films also treat us to three new commentaries (McNichol, the writers and the production manager). But the highlight is tucked away in a bunch of archival interviews (five in all): 11 priceless moments of the late Susan Tyrell's reactions as she watches the film. Pulling faces and yelping, she seems only marginally less deranged than her character; it closes with Tyrell removing her artificial leg. Plus: trailer; TV spot. **Ian Berriman**

i A misplaced squib bag going off by his kidney led to Bo Svenson spending time in hospital, after he began peeing blood.

BREATHE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 20 MAY

2024 | N/A | Download

It's 2039, and a catastrophic loss of trees and plant life has left Earth all but stripped of oxygen. A mother and daughter hold out in a fortified Brooklyn bunker, facing an even more urgent fight for survival when strangers (one played by Milla Jovovich) arrive at their door...

Spike Lee protégé Stefon Bristol conjures an empty, rust-hued world that feels like genre cinema processing global lockdown. The film favours *Panic Room*-style thrills over more intriguing angles, but it's anchored by its humanity. **Nick Setchfield**

MALUM

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★☆☆☆☆

RELEASED 27 MAY

2023 | 18 | Blu-ray

When a film's remade, it's usually because it was a big success – and another director takes the reins. Neither's true of this do-over of 2014's *Last Shift*.

The basics are the same: a rookie cop alone in a decommissioned police station; supernatural weirdness related to a cult. Take two clearly had more money for gruesome effects, giving its jump-scares more punch. But our original verdict still applies: "One freaky thing after another, with diminishing returns." See you in 2034 for take three?

Extras Trailers. **Ian Berriman**

THE COFFEE TABLE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 20 MAY

2024 | N/A | Download

Not a title that promises chills, is it? But explaining its grim significance would ruin this Spanish drama, centred on a bickering middle-aged couple witha newborn baby.

Structurally innovative, it's essentially one long, horribly tense wait for the revelation of a dark secret which the audience are in on from the start. This adds an extra (often bleakly comic) dimension to every conversation. Once the cat's out of the bag, however, you can't help feeling that writer/director Caye Casas has pulled his punches. **Ian Berriman**

HUNT HER KILL HER

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED 27 MAY

2024 | 15 | Blu-ray

A female janitor working her first night shift in a factory is terrorised by masked men in this boilerplate horror. Given that she's a foot shorter than them and clearly runs more slowly, credibility is stretched to breaking point – snapping once she patches up a knife wound with glue and Sellotape.

After a rather dull hide-and-seek start, things pick up for the final 15 minutes. But the big twist is guessable the moment you twig that the intruders are disguising their voices.

Extras Deleted scenes; out-takes; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *All You Need Is Death* • *Dune: Part Two* • *Immaculate* • *Lisa Frankenstein* (20 May)

SHOCK WAVES

SS Experiments, Damp

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1977 | 12 | Blu-ray
Director **Ken Wiederhorn**
Cast **Peter Cushing, Brooke Adams, Fred Buch, Jack Davidson**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **It's a backhanded** compliment given how limited the field is, but *Shock Waves* is one of the better Nazi zombie films – perhaps because it's not what you'd really expect.

The opening narration negates the possibility of any real mystery, explaining that during WW2 the SS experimented with creating invincible soldiers. After a tourist party's boat is damaged by a sinister ghost ship, they fall foul of a unit designed to man U-boats.

It's a pretty silly, under-developed premise. These undead killers are peculiarly keen on lying about submerged in rockpools. Why does ripping off their goggles kill them? And why is there a huge abandoned hotel on the island (home to Peter Cushing, playing a scar-faced Dr Von Exposition)?

However, the sequences of the "Death Corps" troops emerging from the water, or striding through knotted mangrove swamp, are faintly surreal and undeniably uncanny. The film has an eerie, low-key stillness, victims often pulled under the water without even having the time to scream.

While *Shock Waves* will disappoint anyone eager for gore, it does generate a strong sense of foreboding – thanks in part to an impressive score of electronic throbs and creaks (the work of Richard Einhorn, now a respected modern classical composer). In narrative terms, it's crude. As an exercise in atmosphere, it's a qualified success.

SFX's reviews editor completes another issue.

Extras 88 Films' bonuses are carried over from 2014's US Blue Underground release. Director Ken Wiederhorn is accompanied on commentary by Alan Ormsby, who did the zombie make-ups. Then there are four interviews. Cinematographer Reuben Trane (21 minutes) is the stand-out, recounting methods which wouldn't meet modern health and safety standards: to shoot a zombie walking underwater, for example, they filled his pockets up with lead weights!

We also hear from stars Brooke Adams (seven minutes) and Luke Halpin (eight minutes), and the composer (14 minutes). Plus: trailer; TV and radio spots; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ According to the DoP, Peter Cushing's fee was $25,000 for five days' work – about a quarter of the total budget.

THE BODY STEALERS

Pie in the sky

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 20 MAY
1969 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD
Director **Gerry Levy**
Cast **Patrick Allen, George Sanders, Maurice Evans, Hilary Dwyer**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **You don't get** heroes like Bob Megan any more... and it's probably for the best. So libidinous he makes James Bond look like he's on bromide, this "ace troubleshooter" seems more interested in hitting on any woman he sees than investigating the case. Played by Patrick Allen, original voice of *The X Factor*, he's never found without a cigarette in hand, and undoubtedly stinks of Brut.

The case itself is like something from an episode of *Department S*: NATO parachutists are vanishing in thin air, only their harnesses coming back down to Earth. It doesn't take a genius to work out that the cause is surely extraterrestrial. If only Bob could stop copping off for long enough to work it out. His personal best: a breathtaking one minute 30 seconds with a mystery blonde who doesn't show up in photos...

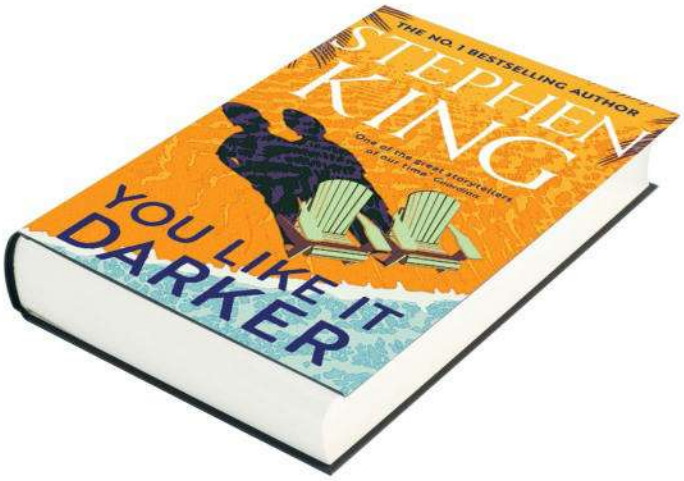
The latest in 88 Films' range of films from British studio Tigon, *The Body Stealers* makes for an amusing time capsule. The main theme is irresistibly groovy (it'd suit an ITC spy series), and the set-up should appeal to fans of Jon Pertwee–era *Doctor Who*.

Sadly, after the disappearances, about the only dramatic incident is a series of coshings, and it ends feebly, with an "explanation" of the aliens' plans that barely warrants the term, and an equally "Will this do?" solution. Entertaining rubbish.

Extras Film writers David Flint and Allan Bryce provide the sort of matey commentary that you'll either find charming or annoying. A second, archival track, featuring a likeably good-humoured Patrick Allen, is rather sparse, as he doesn't remember much. A Making Of (41 minutes) assembles an impressive nine cast and crew (including an actor who spoke *one word*!); this could have been half the length for the insights it affords, but we do learn that George Sanders was "generally pissed". There are two further talking heads: a general intro (11 minutes) which (unconvincingly) argues that the film was a major influence on Jon Pertwee's first season, and an overview of Sanders's career (21 minutes). Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

"Do you enjoy fiddling with knobs, my dear?"

ℹ The model of the Dalek saucer from 1966's *Daleks – Invasion Earth 2150 AD* turns up briefly at the end of the film.



YOU LIKE IT DARKER

He writes it shorter

★★★★☆

RELEASED 21 MAY
496 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Stephen King**
Publisher **Hodder & Stoughton**

The title of this short story collection is a little misleading, unless you get the reference. And since the reference is to a relatively obscure Leonard Cohen song of the same name, chances are many people won't. In which case you'd be forgiven for thinking that *You Like It Darker* is a promise of Stephen King delving further into grisly horror than ever before.

Well, no. Okay, there are a couple of deliciously gruesome moments, but this collection is far from a mere scarefest, and that Cohen reference is the clue. The song's lyrics – framed as a dialogue with God – deal with the songwriter's acceptance of his own mortality upon turning 82.

King is currently 76, and it seems that the author who's spent his career writing about death is now seriously contemplating his own. With a couple of exceptions, the tales in this collection feature an awful lot of old men nearing death, and coming to terms with it in different ways. There are aching backs, sore knees, retirement plans and sympathetic doctors aplenty.

Which may all sound a bit depressing, but actually King is remarkably sanguine about his looming date with the Grim Reaper if the oddly uplifting tone of many of these stories is anything to go by. At the very least, he seems to be a big fan of growing old disgracefully.

There are 12 stories here, all previously unpublished and most of them written recently, though "The Answer Man" was originally begun 35 years ago, and left languishing until King finished it off for this collection.

They range from a few pages long to novella length. One of those novellas is the collection's biggest hook: a belated sequel to *Cujo* called "Rattlesnakes". It features the return of Vic Trenton, who, decades on, is still feeling the pain and guilt of not having saved his son. When he takes a break in a Florida mansion owned by a friend, he soon regrets showing a moment of kindness to a seemingly mad old neighbour who believes she's still pushing her long-dead twins around in a pushchair. It's a classic, you could say formulaic, King ghost story that has little new to offer, but is well-crafted and well creepy.

The other novella is "Danny Coughlin's Bad Dream", one of the few tales without an old man as the protagonist, though it does feature an antagonist – an obsessive cop – who's reluctant to face up to the fact that he's past his professional sell-by date.

A guy who has one psychic dream leads him to a murder victim, which then immediately places him under suspicion, as the police refuse to believe he actually had the dream. There are a lot of familiar King tropes here, but it remains a tightly written, fascinating character study that also raises questions about faith, and will (almost inevitably) make a great miniseries.

The two briefest stories, "The Fifth Step" (recovering drunk asks stranger for help) and "On Slide Inn Road" (family argument on road trip takes very wrong turn) are entertaining short sharp shocks. The mid-length "Finn" (guy beset by bad luck is kidnapped and tortured by mistake) is wonderfully odd, and "The Answer Man" (supernatural being hands out spookily accurate advice to lawyer at key points in his life) is the perfect bittersweet thematic closer to the collection, with a healthy dollop of King's trademark nostalgia.

A couple of tales feel more like half-formed sketches ("The Turbulence Experts", with its supernatural aircraft troubleshooters; alien invasion conspiracy piece "Red Screen"), while "The Dreamers" is a baffling attempt to merge HP Lovecraft and mad scientist movies. But even the lesser, clunkier stories here are, if not wholly satisfying, rattlingly good reads. There's life in the old guy yet.

Dave Golder

i Jalbert, the cop in "Danny Coughlin's Bad Dream", was directly inspired by Inspector Javert in *Les Misérables*.

THE MINISTRY OF TIME

★★★★½

RELEASED 14 MAY
368 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Kaliane Bradley**
Publisher **Sceptre**

There's a buzz about this one. Well before publication, media outlets began singing its praises, and back in February, a BBC adaptation was announced. The latter brought accusations of plagiarism from Spanish television series *Ministerio del Tiempo*. In reality, the two have little in common besides the idea of the titular government department.

A London civil servant transfers to a top-secret new role, supporting refugees who've travelled to the UK not through space, but time. Using an experimental technology, the Ministry has rescued five individuals from various points in the past, in order to study how they adapt – both physically and psychologically – to displacement. Our unnamed narrator's new housemate is one Commander Graham Gore, scooped up from a doomed 1840s Arctic expedition. Hijinks ensue, and sparks fly.

It has all the touches of a great fish-out-of-water comedy: a deft way with language, acute observation and wry humour. But the culture clash between a biracial 21st century woman and a loyal servant of Empire also allows Bradley to explore history and identity from unusual angles. The conspiracy plot that gradually takes centre stage is less convincing, but this is both a charming and a provocative read. **Nic Clarke**

KAVITHRI

★★★★☆

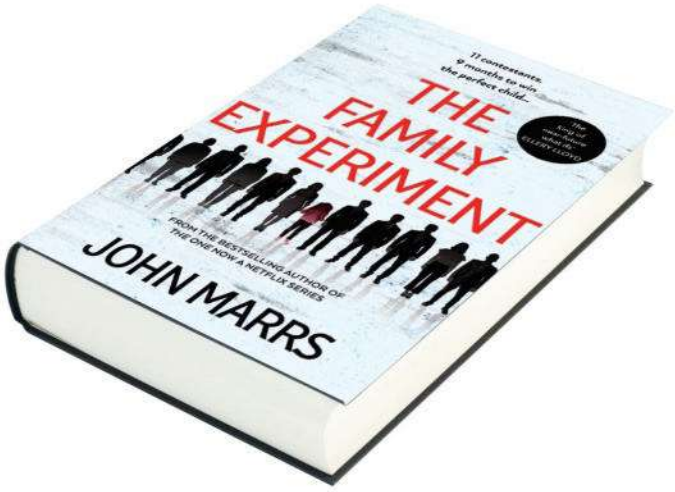
RELEASED **16 MAY**
448 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Aman J Bedi**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Magic, science fiction and Indian culture mingle freely in Aman J Bedi's ambitious debut novel. His titular heroine Kavithri is a Taemu, once a feared race of berserkers, now despised, poor and brutalised under the rule of the Raayans. Seeking an escape from poverty, Kavithri dreams of passing the examinations to train as a mage – provided she doesn't die in the attempt.

An abundance of ideas competes for space in Bedi's fast-paced adventure, and he paints his world in strong, bold colours, from evoking the dirt and humidity of the slums to the cruelty of the caste system.

What's less clear is the level of technology in this society, where gas lamps and steam-powered rickshaws sit uneasily alongside colossal war machines. The mechanics of magic are more fully articulated, although the damage-absorbing armour that features a display that announces when it's "full" feels more suitable for a videogame.

Kavithri's journey from downtrodden to defiant takes unexpected twists and turns, and the moment she embraces her long-denied heritage delivers a potent catharsis. As now seems compulsory, the violence is vicious, and there's an imaginatively gruesome torture sequence. This, combined with Kavirthi's plight and the unfiltered rawness of her emotions, makes for a bruising experience. **David West**



THE FAMILY EXPERIMENT

The Parent Trap

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
464 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **John Marrs**
Publisher **Macmillan**

John Marrs returns to the world of *The One* and *The Marriage Act* for his latest slice of near-future speculative fiction. This time the source of the tech-induced angst is the eponymous metaverse-based reality show, in which contestants compete for a cash prize by raising realistic virtual kids.

This is a particularly chilling premise. For any parent, the idea that millions of viewers could watch – and comment upon – your child-rearing prowess in real time is the stuff of nightmares.

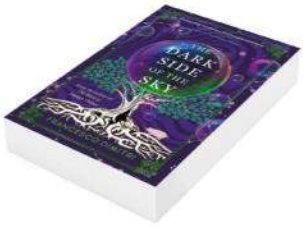
The cost of failure in this contest is painfully high, seeing as everyone but the winners will be powerless to stop the digital child they've raised and loved – from infant to adulthood in the space of nine months – being erased.

It's an undeniably powerful hook, but one that too often comes at the expense of plausibility. While Marrs has tended to keep one foot planted in the real world, *The Family Experiment*'s combination of sophisticated haptic suits, a *Ready Player One*-like metaverse, and AI offspring who could ace the Voight-Kampff test feel like a technological stretch too far.

It's a shame, because this politically-charged novel has plenty to say about the present day with its powerful plotlines about human trafficking and privatised healthcare. The book also suffers from a lack of relatable or sympathetic characters. There's an excess of skeletons in the various contestants' closets, and – while this is entirely justified in the overall context of the story – it's not easy to care when things inevitably go south.

Short, snappy, cliffhanger-filled chapters do keep the pages turning as the narrative hops between the various protagonists' arcs. But as a piece of speculative fiction, *The Family Experiment* doesn't quite deliver the results you were hoping for. **Richard Edwards**

i Marrs says Catriona Campbell's *AI By Design: A Plan For Living With Artificial Intelligence* helped him understand AI.



THE DARK SIDE OF THE SKY

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
368 pages | **Paperback/ebook**
Author **Francesco Dimitri**
Publisher **Titan Books**

The tricky thing about cults is that their members rarely think they're in one until it's far too late – if indeed they ever realise it.

The Dark Side Of The Sun centres on the Bastion, a reclusive group in rural Italy that runs the Open Feast, an annual, super-exclusive party. Grieving Charlie comes fleeing the ruins of her old life, while Zoey is there for her own, more cynical reasons. It's not long, however, before the pair discover that there's more than just sex and drugs to the Open Feast. There's magic here, and a desperate plan to save the world from looming disaster.

Francesco Dimitri's third English language novel is an intelligent work about delusion, hubris and the dangers of mob justice. Told from several different points of view, including the collective hive mind of the Bastion itself, the book indoctrinates the reader into the cult before things inevitably start to come apart at the seams.

That makes for a gripping second half and a satisfying conclusion, but it does mean spending a lot of time with a cast of characters who start out as a bit annoying and self-important and end up largely hateful. Dimitri's world is an evocatively realised bucolic paradise tinged with wild magic, but it's a shame about all the bloody hippies. **Will Salmon**

STAR WARS: RETURN OF THE JEDI – A VISUAL ARCHIVE

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

304 pages | Hardback

Authors **Kelly Knox, ST Bende, Clayton Sandell**

Publisher **Titan Books**

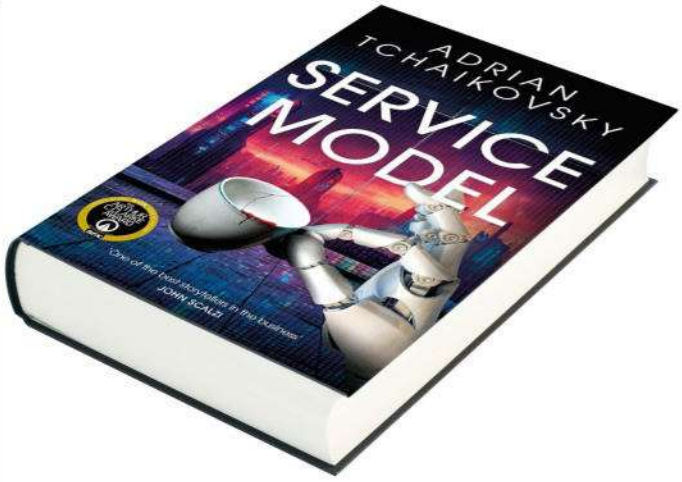
JW Rinzler's exhaustive *The Making Of Return Of The Jedi* felt like the definitive statement, but here's an altogether breezier behind-the-scenes account.

Considerably lighter on detail it may be, but it's still a well-researched trove of facts and images, covering everything from development to production, posters to merchandise, and even the small-screen Ewok spin-offs long consigned to the Outer Rim of Lucasfilm lore.

Some items are presented as stickers, pamphlets or pull-outs: the most imaginative of these is a packet of continuity Polaroids of Rebel troopers; the most shameless a handwritten letter from a 13-year-old Warwick Davis, hoping to blag some action figures off Lucas.

The tone is upbeat – *Jedi* is, we're assured, "an utterly intoxicating brew of unfettered imagination" – and it's a book keener to connect the 1983 movie to modern canon than talk about creative tensions or divisive storytelling choices. The decision to all but ignore Leia's iconic slave girl costume is curious, too. But along the way there are some genuinely fascinating glimpses of paths not taken.

Nick Setchfield



SERVICE MODEL

The robot butler did it

★★★★☆

RELEASED 6 JUNE

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Adrian Tchaikovsky**

Publisher **Tor**

Ever wondered what Skynet, the Oracle and other intelligent machines talk about when there are no people listening in? It's a question at the heart of this entertaining novel, which explores civilisation-ending AI with a very satirical eye.

The protagonist of *Service Model* is Charles, a robot valet whose employment is brought to an abrupt end when he inadvertently murders his wealthy human master. Although Charles can find no record of the dastardly deed in his operating system – and reasons that things can't be all that bad, seeing as the fatal malfunction has only occurred once – he becomes an artificial person of interest to the automated police force.

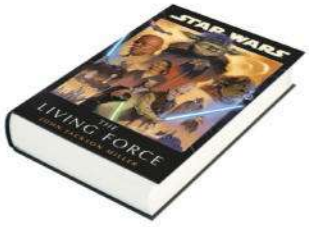
He's also befriended by an eccentric automaton known as "the Wonk", who believes that Charles's programming has achieved sentience.

Adrian Tchaikovsky's second book in the space of a few months (after the brilliant *Alien Clay*) proves that he's as eclectic as he is prolific. It starts off as a comedic thought experiment, as robots tie themselves in knots of logic trying to work out if the butler actually did it. But the novel's scope soon becomes more ambitious, as Charles's mission to find gainful employment takes him on a road trip through a world where humans are no longer the dominant species – and robots are just as prone to needless bureaucracy as their creators.

The story does start to meander as Charles gets deeper into his odyssey, and could arguably have stood to lose a few pages. Nonetheless, Tchaikovsky's witty robot-to-robot dialogue and Douglas Adams-esque ear for the absurd keeps things tripping along, with the naïve, duty-driven Charles proving to be an engaging and sympathetic "hero".

Service Model also feels extremely timely, asking pertinent questions about our rapidly evolving relationship with AI, while suggesting that humanity will probably have as big a part to play in its own downfall as any malevolent computer. The rise of the machines may well be nigh – just don't expect it to come with the face of Arnold Schwarzenegger. **Richard Edwards**

i Tchaikovsky's The Final Architecture series is up for a Hugo Award. The winner will be announced at Worldcon in August.



STAR WARS: THE LIVING FORCE

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **John Jackson Miller**

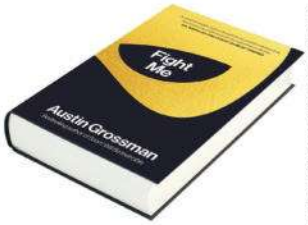
Publisher **Del Rey**

In an echo of the much-derided tax disputes that kickstarted *The Phantom Menace*, the catalyst for this *Star Wars* novel – set a year before the prequel trilogy – is Republic budget cuts.

Aware that the galactic populace is getting increasingly disillusioned, all 12 members of the Jedi Council embark on a PR mission to a faded world on the edge of Hutt space. But with the criminal gangs in the region proving to be a second-rate (at best) threat, it's like dispatching the Avengers to open a library.

Alas, the likes of Depa Billaba, Eeth Koth and Oppo Rancisis aren't household names like Iron Man, Captain America and Thor, and despite author John Jackson Miller's best efforts to have fun with Jedi Masters who were seen but not heard in *Episode I*, the assorted members of this undirty dozen struggle to leave a lasting impression.

In terms of the bigger *Star Wars* picture, the book asks plenty of portentous questions about the futures of the Jedi and the Old Republic. But beyond a few references to enigmatic Clone Army founder Sifo-Dyas, a nod to Palpatine's grand plan, and a cameo from a future Imperial officer, *The Living Force* is effectively a standalone tale – and an adventure that could have stayed locked away in the Jedi archives. **Richard Edwards**



FIGHT ME

★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 MAY

402 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Austin Grossman**

Publisher **Michael Joseph**

Having previously dabbled in the art of the superhero novel in 2008's *Soon I Shall Become Invincible*, writer Austin Grossman has returned to the world of caped crusaders with his latest book.

Fight Me is the tale of Alex Beekman, an ex-member of a teenage superhero team from the '90s who's now 40 years old and living a dull life as a college professor. However, when the man who originally gifted him his powers turns up dead, Alex tries to find out why, a search that reunites him with his similarly dysfunctional ex-teammates.

Mixed with lengthy flashbacks exploring the team's formation, *Fight Me* operates in a similar vein to Grossman's previous superhero novel, blending the lurid, anything-goes madness of Silver Age comic books with emotionally complicated characters and realistic consequences. This collision of fantasy and reality doesn't always feel fresh, since Grossman is exploring territory that's been strip-mined over the past four decades.

He's on firmer ground when it comes to the characterisation, portraying the messiness of friendships in a world where every argument or falling-out can potentially happen on a cosmic scale. *Fight Me* doesn't always land its satirical superhero punches, but a melancholy tone gives its quieter moments a surprising impact. **Saxon Bullock**

SNOWBLOODED

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

400 pages | Hardback

Author **Emma Sterner-Radley**

Publisher **Solaris**

The snowy streets of 18th century Sweden provide the backdrop for Emma Sterner-Radley's tale of squabbling assassins. The author puts her own spin on the assassin's role in fantasy fiction, imagining them as agents of the state who discreetly eliminate threats to public security.

Valour and Petrichor, lifelong rivals in the Order of Axsten, are charged with finding and killing Brandquist, leader of the criminal underworld in the city of Vinterstock. One small obstacle: no one knows who Brandquist is or what they look like.

The protagonists are an archetypal odd couple: Valour is rowdy, foul-mouthed and libidinous, distracted from her mission by the charms of wealthy socialite Ingrid Rytterdahl, while Petrichor is polite, proper and thoroughly repressed. The sniping between the pair seems intended to be comedic, but their incessant quarrelling is wearisome.

The major plot twists are easy to foresee, particularly when it comes to Brandquist's identity, and the grand showdown against the main villain is clumsily executed. That's uncharacteristic, because the earlier action scenes possess pace and focus. However, Sterner-Radley's worldbuilding is strong as she crafts the rituals and politics of the Order of Axsten, while her heroes possess vivid inner lives – if not any witty insults. **David West**

THE HOUSE THAT HORROR BUILT

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

336 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Christina Henry**

Publisher **Titan Books**

You know that old saw about not meeting your heroes? Harry Adams, the hapless heroine of Christina Henry's newest chiller, probably should've heeded the warning. But she's desperate for a job to keep a roof over her head, so when a gig comes up cleaning for her favourite horror director, the reclusive Javier Castillo, she takes it.

He's a little strict, and a little too enamoured of his own genius, but the job isn't too bad... until one of Castillo's scarier-looking movie props starts taking an interest in Harry. Could it be haunted? Or even *possessed*?

Throwing a horror-obsessed protagonist into a horror story is nothing new, of course, but it is initially fun here to have both a fan and a creator stuck bang in the middle of a supernatural drama. Harry is a single mum to a teenage boy, who's also starstruck when he first meets Castillo, adding another layer to both her plight and the metatextuality of it all.

Trouble is, despite the intriguing premise and genre-savvy cheekiness, it becomes depressingly predictable as the story progresses, even playing into some miserably Mary Whitehouse-ian stereotypes. Finding your hero is kind of a dick might be less disappointing than the weirdly truncated non-ending of this book. **Sarah Dobbs**

REISSUES

Our paperback picks this month begin with Ann Leckie's **TRANSLATION STATE** (★★★★½, out now, Orbit). Set in the author's Imperial Radch universe, this standalone story sees

the lives of three characters intersecting: a translator from the alien Presger species; a diplomat tasked with hunting down a fugitive who's been missing for over 200 years; and an adopted mechanic desperate to learn about his genetic roots. We said: "There's a lot going on here, but a linking theme is the idea of identity... A wise, ambitious and darkly funny novel." The latest of Karen Lord's Cygnus Beta books, **THE BLUE, BEAUTIFUL WORLD** (★★★★½, 16 May, Gollancz) brings together a genius inventor, a

beloved celebrity, a young activist and a pop megastar for a first-contact adventure that's unusually eerie, confusing and contradictory. We said: "Rich, strange and accomplished enough that comparisons with Ursula Le Guin don't seem so fanciful." Finally, Tony Santorella's **BORED GAY WEREWOLF** (★★★★☆, 6 June, Atlantic) follows Brian, a lycanthropic slacker whose minimum-effort existence of waiting work and Grindr hook-ups is transformed when he gets involved in a

werewolf-only club, which offers personal training sessions and life-coaching. We said: "A really smart take on toxic masculinity... An intelligent, big-hearted novel that perfectly captures both the horror and ennui of existing today."

THE THEATRE OF GLASS AND SHADOWS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 MAY

386 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Anne Corlett**

Publisher **Black & White Publishing**

Immersive theatre is not everyone's cup of tea. When done well, though – as by UK company Punchdrunk – it's both utterly mesmerising and deeply disorientating.

Anne Corlett's second novel is set in an alternate-history London, where the Theatre District is literally a law unto itself. A self-governing borough for over 200 years, the District is essentially one big 24/7 theatrical production. To this weird and wonderful place comes orphaned Juliet, in search of the truth about the mother she never knew.

The rhythms of the District are clearly inspired by Punchdrunk, with visitors handed masks as they exit the Tube, and performers given to singling out random audience members for sneak peeks into secret rooms. But Corlett has built a wonderfully glittering and dysfunctional society on these foundations, which unfolds for us through Juliet's star-struck eyes.

For much of the novel, there's a well-crafted balance between the glamour Juliet seeks out and the foreboding she ignores. The climax happens on stage, and it's rather static and abrupt after the dynamic exploration that's gone before. We'd welcome more stories in this setting, though. **Nic Clarke**

HOW TO BECOME THE DARK LORD AND DIE TRYING

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 23 MAY

448 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Django Wexler**

Publisher **Orbit Books**

Your enjoyment of this book will depend on your tolerance for its wacky footnotes. There are *millions* of the flippin' things – explaining lore, geography and titbits (pun intended) from the main character's sexual encounters. The good news is that you can swat them away like wasps if they annoy you and it makes no difference to the plot.

Our hero, Davi, is caught in a time loop in a bloodthirsty fantasy world. After being ported over somehow from our own, she's spent centuries trying to survive by teaming up with the land's good guys, but to no avail. So, fed up, she decides to rule the kingdom instead by assembling a horde of Orcs and their buddies.

As our narrator, Davi is the female version of every wisecracking male hero in a Hollywood film or TV show, recalling everything from Peter Venkman's smugness to Deadpool's meta double-entendres. Sure, she's a lot of fun, but her relentless quips become as wearing as her footnotes and undermine the more serious story elements.

And there lies another issue: her quest feels so much like a *D&D* campaign – there's even an omniscient DM shaping the time loop – that you may be tempted to just play a game of that instead. **Jayne Nelson**

THE DOCTOR WHO PRODUCTION DIARY: THE HARTNELL YEARS

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

668 pages | Paperback

Author **David Brunt**

Publisher **Telos Publishing**

Here's the hefty first entry in an ambitious, multi-volume series that aims to chart the entire behind-the-scenes history of classic *Doctor Who*, day by day if not quite Dalek by Dalek. Assembled from an exhaustive trawl of original paperwork held by the BBC Written Archives Centre, it's a soberly written, detail-focused insight into the pioneering years of the programme.

David Brunt – a former historian of the *Doctor Who* Appreciation Society – takes everything from internal memos to contract files to taxi receipts and orders it all into diary form, recounting the show's evolution from the conceptual spark of "a senile old man in a time machine" to the arrival of Patrick Troughton (though frustratingly little documentation survives on the decision to depose original star William Hartnell).

Skewering fan myths along the way, it's a truly impressive feat of contextualisation. More than that, it offers crucial glimpses of the human story, recording bruised egos and rumblings of dissatisfaction. BBC designer Raymond Cusick requests fair recompense for creating the iconography of the Daleks. His bonus? A thoroughly exterminatable £175. **Nick Setchfield**

ALSO OUT

There's plenty more titles that we couldn't fit in. Bookworms will know Cixin Liu as the author of Hugo-winner *The Three-Body Problem*. One for fans, rather than a jumping-on point, **A VIEW FROM THE STARS** (out now, Head Of Zeus) is mostly made up of essays about SF, interspersed with interviews and a little short fiction. Edited by Jared Shurin (formerly of geek culture blog *Pornokitsch*), **THE BIG BOOK OF CYBERPUNK VOLUME ONE/VOLUME TWO** (out now, Vintage) together run to over 1,000 pages, featuring a total of 108 stories. You can find a full list at bit.ly/bigcyber. Colonisation, betrayal and forgiveness are, apparently, among the themes of Amal Singh's **THE GARDEN OF DELIGHTS** (out now, Flame Tree Press). Set in a city where petals are currency and flowers are magic, it centres on a Caretaker who must join forces with a girl who can change reality when a magical rot takes root. We're promised both "swoon-worthy romance" and "whimsical sorcery" in Sydney J Shields's debut **THE HONEY WITCH** (16 May, Orbit), which follows a young woman being trained as the next Honey Witch. Her magic powers come with a catch: no one can fall in love with her. But then sceptic Lottie turns up... Finally, gothic romance is the order of the day in Laura Purcell's YA book **MOONSTONE** (23 May, HarperVoyager), in which a girl is sent to live with a strict godmother and her strange daughter. Cue mysterious deaths, claw marks on the doors and eerie howling in the night. We can likely guess where that's leading...

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

John Marrs

The journalist turned novelist is more than just a Ken...

AUTHOR IMAGE PROVIDED

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

For the first draft, I'll work in complete silence. It's easy if I'm at home, but if I'm working elsewhere, I'll wear noise-reducing headphones but no music comes out of them. For later drafts, I'll listen to compilations of moodier tracks by Massive Attack, Röyksopp, Sigur Rós, Cigarettes After Sex and The War On Drugs. The more depressing, the better I rewrite.

How do you deal with the urge to procrastinate?

With great difficulty! Everything distracts me, from a sudden urge to empty the dishwasher, or to search eBay for a single I once owned in the '80s, or painting the garage walls. Which is why I set myself a daily deadline of 2,000 words to write. Once I hit it, I'm free to faff until the cows come home.

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you need to keep in check?

In each book I find I have a subconscious obsession with overusing a different word. Previous overuses include "eyes", "just", "that" and "nevertheless". In *The Family Experiment* it was "sobbed". Each time, I'm horrified when I check how many times I've used it and hit delete.

> **"I find I have a subconscious obsession with overusing a different word"**

Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?

Yes. The first half of *Keep It In The Family* was based on a dream I had about finding six suitcases in an attic, each containing the skeletal remains of a child. I woke up at 1am and dictated it into my phone so I wouldn't forget.

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

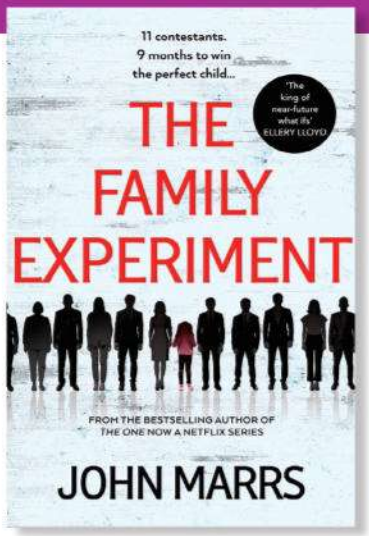
I'm in constant awe of other writers. I'd love to possess the imagination of Dave Eggers and Blake Crouch, be able to plot like Peter Swanson and CJ Tudor, or write characters like John Boyne and Lisa Jewel can.

Which SF/fantasy book most impressed you in the last year?

Helen Fields's *Profile K* is the perfect blend of psychological thriller, a serial killer manhunt and *Black Mirror*-style tech. Her use of crime prevention software feels scarily plausible.

Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

Someone once sent me a photograph of one they'd found in a roadside cafe in Iran. There are no book copyright laws over there, so you make nothing from anything published. But it was a bit odd seeing it there.


11 contestants.
9 months to win the perfect child...
'The king of near-future what ifs' ELLERY LLOYD
THE FAMILY EXPERIMENT
FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE ONE NOW A NETFLIX SERIES
JOHN MARRS

What's the strangest gift you've ever received from a reader?

It was a recreation of my entire career using Barbie doll figures and props. They included her pink plastic car being driven by Ken dressed in clothes I'd wear, tiny rolled up magazine covers for publications I'd written for, even a doll version of our son. The attention to detail was amazing. Bizarre, but amazing!

The Family Experiment is out now, published by Pan Macmillan.

Massive Attack provide a soundtrack for rewriting.

ALAMY

ULTIMATE BLACK PANTHER

Small change

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer **Bryan Hill**
Artist **Stefano Caselli**

ISSUES 1-3 **If you want a clear** example of how big a deal Black Panther has become since the 2017 blockbuster movie, just look at his treatment in both iterations of Marvel's Ultimate universe. T'Challa did feature in the original *Ultimate* comics, but only made a handful of appearances and was never given any significant spotlight. By contrast, in Marvel's rebooted Ultimate-verse, he's a flagship character in one of the main new ongoing titles.

Ultimate Black Panther is also the closest that the new Ultimate universe has got to the original's goal: giving new readers a relatively accessible jumping-on point. The complex details of this reboot universe are mostly kept in the background in these opening three issues, and the changes from Black Panther's Marvel continuity aren't as major as they are for Peter Parker.

My king!
A "please" wouldn't go amiss, your maj.
Call the queen. And my sister. And the Vodu-Khan.
Our enemy calls themselves... Moon Knight.
Wakanda is at war.

The story follows T'Challa as a newly crowned king trying to protect Wakanda from the encroaching forces of the entities Ra and Khonshu, known collectively as Moon Knight. Following his father's assassination, T'Challa teams up with a pair of rebels who've unearthed the real reason behind Moon Knight's thirst for conquest, but writer Bryan Hill plays such a slow-burn game that even by the end of issue three we don't yet know exactly what that reason is.

This does help to build the character relationships – especially since we're clearly heading for a love triangle between T'Challa, his current queen Okoye and weather-wielding mutant Storm – but it also means this is a series that'll read much better in collected form than monthly instalments.

While Hill's approach has its issues, he also delivers some effective pacing and brisk set-pieces, while making the quieter character-based scenes impactful. It's a slickly executed comic, and one of the biggest strengths on display here is Stefano Caselli's artwork. The visuals may be very traditional in terms of superhero storytelling, but they're accomplished with style and energy, showcasing some great world-building details and character design.

> **These issues are well-crafted and enjoyable**

These first three issues are well-crafted and enjoyable, but what they don't have is a really attention-grabbing narrative hook. The changes to Black Panther's world aren't big enough to feel daring or exciting, and the results aren't anywhere near as engaging as the recently relaunched *Ultimate Spider-Man*. There's fun to be had in this remixed version of Black Panther – it's just currently lacking an element that would make it an essential read.

Saxon Bullock

i Hill has also dabbled in TV and film: he's written episodes of *Titans* and *Ash vs Evil Dead*, and the 2021 SF noir *Zone 414*.

I USE MY JETS—BLAST BACK TO VILLAGE.
NO, DON'T! DO YOU WANT TO GET US CLOBBERED FOR WITCH-CRAFT? FOR PETE'S SAKE, USE YOUR COMPUTER SENSE, ARCHIE!
ARCHIE

ROBOT ARCHIE AND THE TIME MACHINE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 MAY
Publisher **Rebellion**
Writer **Ted Cowan**
Artists **Ted Kearon, Mike Western**

COLLECTION **A walking** mechanical marvel with superstrength and a dazzling electronic brain, Robot Archie never felt lacking in the gimmick department. In 1968, boys' weekly *Lion* gave him a fresh twist all the same, in the form of his very own time machine – disguised, for reasons that resist the tyranny of logic, as a giant chess piece.

This writ-dodging TARDIS rip-off is essentially a random plot generator, a means to fling Archie and his human chums Ted and Ken across the centuries. Most of the resulting adventures are straight historical romps, pitting the "Amazing Metal Man" against knights, dinosaurs and highwaymen. "Archie kiddeth you not!" he declares, blending into Ye Olde England.

But the highlight of this new reprint collection is a tale that leans into the sci-fi of it all, depositing our heroes in a strangely tropical future London overrun by plantlife and alien invaders. Piling on memorable imagery from a creeper-festooned Tower Bridge to giant-sized cyber-caterpillars, it's a deliriously entertaining pulp epic.

But boy, Ted and Ken are a pair of dicks. Forever lambasting Archie as everything from a tin buffoon to a mechanical ass, it's a miracle they don't find themselves abandoned to the robot sharks.

Nick Setchfield

BEWARE THE PLANET OF THE APES

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writers **Marc Guggenheim, Doug Moench**
Artists **Alvaro Lopez, Alfredo Alcala, George Tuska**

ISSUES 1-4 **While the new movie** is set during the apes' early days as dominant species on Earth, this four-parter takes place on the cusp of the 1968 film.

Integrating material from 1975's *Adventures On The Planet Of The Apes*, Marc Guggenheim cleverly weaves extracts from the first movie adaptation into the story: sometimes as extended dream sequences; other times incorporating a single panel into the main narrative. The original illustrations provide an earthy contrast with the cleaner linework of Alvaro Lopez's modern-day art. Bringing together classic characters, Guggenheim impressively brings to life deaf mute Nova, who finds her voice for the first time thanks to Ivana, psychic leader of a mutant colony.

The story centres on Cornelius and Zira's journey into the Forbidden Zone to rescue her nephew Lucius, who's been captured by the militant Hominidae Empire. The ensuing action initially appears quite inconsequential, before Guggenheim delivers a devastating climax, which ties into 1970's *Beneath The Planet of the Apes* and has surprisingly emotional resonance for the events of *Planet Of The Apes* itself. **Stephen Jewell**

THE ONE HAND/ THE SIX FINGERS

Gripping Yarns

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Image Comics**
Writers **Ram V/Dan Watters**
Artists **Laurence Campbell/ Sumit Kumar**

ISSUES 1-3 **Crossovers don't have** to be limited to superhero comics – they can turn up anywhere, including this pair of interlocking sci-fi thrillers from Image Comics. Crafted by two separate creative teams, but very much telling one combined story, *The One Hand* and *The Six Fingers* give us a dark futuristic thriller reminiscent of classic serial killer movie *Seven*.

Both stories are set in the futuristic metropolis of Neo Novena. **The One Hand** ★★★½☆ focuses on police officer Ari, as a bizarre murder revives a decades-old serial killer case he thought was solved. As Ari investigates, his sense of reality starts fracturing.

The Six Fingers ★★★★☆ makes things even stranger, following a character who *might* be the killer. Archaeology student Johannes is plagued by visions of committing the recent murder, but can't work out why he might have done it, or what connects him to killings that happened before he was born.

We're three issues in on both five-part miniseries, and they're already intersecting in disturbing ways, building up an intricate mystery. While *The One Hand* sticks firmly to the gritty noir vibe, *The Six Fingers* is more effective with its science fiction world-building, often feeling reminiscent of *2000 AD*'s weirder moments.

It's hard to tell at this stage whether the project's moody explorations of art and sanity will ultimately end up satisfying or baffling, but these two series are definitely one of the more interesting experiments to hit comics in recent years. **Saxon Bullock**

i Ram V's inspirations were the Cormac McCarthy novel *The Sunset Limited*, and an episode of podcast *Philosophy Bites*.

BENEATH THE TREES WHERE NOBODY SEES

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **IDW Publishing**
Writer/artist: **Patrick Horvath**

ISSUES 1-5 **In a few months,** *Beneath The Trees Where Nobody Sees* has gone from being just another indie comic created by a relative newcomer – writer and artist Patrick Horvath – to IDW's biggest-selling title outside of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* franchise. It's easy to see why, and we suspect this book will have a long life past its initial six-issue run.

Samantha is an anthropomorphic bear living in Woodbrook, a quaint town full of other talking animals. She's also a serial killer, although she doesn't practise her trade here, preferring to visit the big city to indulge in her crimes. Unfortunately for Sam, however, there's another murderer in town – a situation that forces her into the uneasy role of detective.

Yes, this is *Dexter: The Sylvanian Family Years*. Cute and sinister is a perennially winning combination, and Horvath strikes a fine balance here. The art has a storybook quality that's hugely appealing, but he never shies away from depicting moments of brutal violence. The premise is hardly original, but in an odd way that works in its favour. These animals are, for all intents and purposes, simply furry people, and presenting them in such a childlike way only serves to make the horror all the more unsettling. **Will Salmon**

STELLAR BLADE

Nier Enough

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PlayStation 5**

Publisher **Sony Interactive Entertainment**

VIDEOGAME **On hearing the pitch** "uber-capable warrior women from space descend to a post-apocalyptic Earth to kick arse and take names", you'd be forgiven for expecting a bit of a romp – something a little sexy, maybe a touch campy. Unfortunately, this action RPG absolutely stacks it in its sci-fi heels.

For a start, that premise is played deadly straight. You'll see the story's twists coming light years off, and the script seems totally uninterested in having even a little bit of fun with that. There are few bright ideas here, the levels you pelt through with a gazelle-like gait offering little beyond rehashing genre heavy-hitters *Nier: Automata* and *Bayonetta* in terms of both environment and creature design.

Still, though ultimately derivative in much of its execution, it's hard not to respect *Stellar Blade*'s willingness to switch things up; yes, it all feels a little familiar, but you'll go from hacking and slashing through open zones in one level to shooting your way out of the claustrophobic corridors of a *Resident Evil*-style laboratory in another.

Offbeat side quests provide a glimpse of what could have been: one unlikely loner instructs us in the simple pleasures of fishing, while another, initially imposing figure reveals themselves to be the best hairdresser this side of the end times. What *Stellar Blade* can stand proud on is its combat. Taking clear inspiration from the *Dark Souls* series, most bouts against gnarly-looking beasties emphasise the importance of picking your moments for parries, dodges, and heavy attacks. Optional QTEs make getting into this groove much easier from the off, but then handfuls of skills on top make this more approachable than some of the development team's slower-paced favourites.

Also deserving of kudos is the dress-up game hidden within, which boasts a catwalk's-worth of unlockable costumes; you'll scour every corner of those overly familiar levels looking for the piece that will pull your look together. Sadly, stoic protagonist EVE revels in not a stitch of it, expressing zero opinion about even the most questionable outfit options – and if not even she's having any fun, then what's the point? **Jess Kinghorn**

i EVE's appearance is based on Korean model Shin Jae-eun, though only her body was 3D-scanned for the character. Bizarre.

"Oh Vic, I've fallen."

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Running time **58 minutes**

Format **Radio (now on BBC Sounds)**

Publisher **Radio Four**

AUDIO DRAMA **"I am not a man,"** declares alien exile Thomas Jerome Newton in the opening moments of Radio Four's adaptation of Walter Tevis's novel. "But I am like a man."

It feels like a mission statement. Nicolas Roeg brought Newton to the screen in the suitably extraterrestrial form of David Bowie, a choice that played to the power of his star's uncanny iconography while keeping the audience one step removed from Tevis's strange interstellar visitor. Radio gives us an altogether more knowable and sympathetic protagonist, one who makes conspiratorial asides to the listener.

A softly spoken Harry Treadaway unlocks the puzzle of Newton for us. It's an earnest performance, vulnerable, with flashes of the steel required for an epic interplanetary mission. Just when you wonder if he's a little too relatable, a startling scene splinters Newton's psyche in two, Gollum style, one voice cool and distant, the other all too human.

Against an uneasy, ambient score by Gazelle Twin, and a truly chameleonic supporting turn by Christopher Eccleston, this '80s-set production weaves in historic news clips to underscore its parallels with present-day tensions. "I'm becoming a lost and foolish creature," despairs Newton. Welcome to planet Earth, mate. **Nick Setchfield**

LONDON AFTER MIDNIGHT

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

56 minutes | Download/vinyl/CD

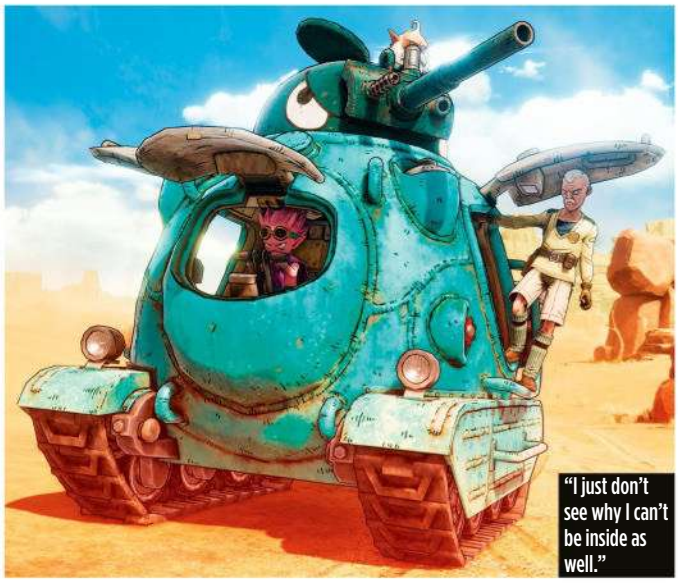
Publisher **Pocket Universe Productions**

AUDIO DRAMA **The Lon Chaney** vehicle *London After Midnight* (1927) is one of the most famous lost films – the last known surviving print destroyed in a fire in 1965. Chaney's gruesome make-up for the pop-eyed, pointy-toothed and possibly vampiric Man in the Beaver Hat was one of his most iconic. This version is based on the original screenplay – which differs in some details from the final continuity script.

Adapting a silent film for audio is an odd idea really, especially one where Chaney's artistry was the main draw. It certainly wasn't the plotting, accurately described as "incoherent" and "nonsensical" by contemporary critics.

The thread becomes even harder to follow here – in the absence of visual cues it becomes much less clear that a key scene involves hypnotism. Perhaps trying to compensate for the fact that (as was common in movies of the time) supernatural goings-on turn out to have a rational explanation, the producers also add a new twist ending – an odd choice.

The sound design is effectively atmospheric, and Dan Starkey (*Doctor Who*'s Strax the Sontaran) brings a lively urgency to the role of Sir James Hamlin. But if you want a sense of what the original film was like, you're probably better off looking up the crude but faithful reconstruction made for TCM in 2002. **Calvin Baxter**


"I just don't see why I can't be inside as well."

SAND LAND

Dune roamin'

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **24 APRIL**

Reviewed on **PS5**

Also on **Xbox Series X|S, PS4, PC**

Publisher **Bandai Namco**

VIDEOGAME **Blazing through a** scorching desert in bikes, tanks, cars and bipedal mechs with machine guns is a truckload of fun in *Sand Land*, the action-RPG adaptation of *Dragonball* creator Akira Toriyama's 2000 manga series, but it can only ride the high for so long.

> **"Every match-up can be brute-forced using the tank's superior firepower"**

The demon prince Beelzebub is recruited by Sheriff Rao to bring water back to the wasteland, and so we venture out into the derelict world as the former on an uncharacteristically noble quest, in which fiend and human learn to respect one another. It's charming stuff, but after a dozen or so hours the characters simply stop growing, like someone forgot to flesh them out over *Sand Land*'s latter stages.

Similarly, vehicular combat is great initially, but sadly the fun doesn't last forever. Obliterating enemy bikers with a tank turret, or gunning down evil soldiers with a shotgun from a bike is entertaining, but there's little variation to be found here – every match-up can be brute-forced using the tank's superior firepower.

Customisation options are vast for every vehicle, and they mesh well with the RPG nature of *Sand Land*, as Beelzebub grinds out bounties for better vehicle parts and weapons.

Sand Land's open world consists mainly of fetch quests and swarms of the same few enemy types – a real missed opportunity to let us get to know the world better. The entire adventure starts out with real potential, only to face-plant in the dirt as the story, characters and combat make painfully little progression.

Hirun Cryer

i All 13 episodes of a *Sand Land* anime series (the first six of which adapt the manga) are now available on Disney+.

HEROES: THE BRITISH INVASION OF AMERICAN COMICS

★★★★☆

RUNNING UNTIL **20 OCTOBER**

Venue **The Cartoon Museum, Fitzrovia, London**

EXHIBITION **Ranging from** WW Denslow's curious 1901 proto-superhero Billy Bounce to Rachael Stott's 2022 work on *Fantastic Four*, The Cartoon Museum's latest exhibition encompasses over a century of comic art from both sides of the Atlantic. Aiming to demonstrate how British and American creators have influenced one another over time, it has plenty of interest, although it struggles to coalesce as a whole.

While it features some obvious material, such as pages from *Watchmen* and *V For Vendetta*, there are also plenty of lesser-known gems, such as John "Jock" McCall illustrating Tom Dare's adventures for 1949's *Slick Fun*, or John Stokes's fine art from Valiant's 1972 UK *Star Trek* strip.

Most impressive: Brian Bolland's pencil breakdowns for his contribution to 1986's *Batman* 400, which like his cover sketch for *Animal Man* 57 (also included), display an incredible amount of detail. Sections are also devoted to both the initial '80s influx of British talent to the US and the birth of Vertigo in the '90s, with examples of Duncan Fegredo's *Enigma* and John Ridgway's *Hellblazer*. Like everything else in this intriguing show, they provide a feast for both the eyes and the mind. **Stephen Jewell**

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

AFRICA

With Africa Day looming on 25 May, what better time is there to test your knowledge of depictions of the continent in sci-fi and fantasy?

Quizmaster ***Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor***

QUESTION 1
According to *Strange New Worlds*, in which African country was Nyota Uhura born?

QUESTION 2
The 1992 horror film *Dust Devil* is set predominantly in Namibia. Name the director.

QUESTION 3
Who wrote the 2016 novel *Rosewater*, in which an agent with psychic powers investigates a mysterious alien dome in Nigeria?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Supply the title that's been removed from this film poster.

QUESTION 5
In which country did location shooting take place for the scenes in *Star Wars* featuring the Lars family moisture farm?

QUESTION 6
What's the connection between these TV series? *Charlie Jade*, *Outcasts*, *Raised By Wolves* and *The Watch*.

QUESTION 7
Birnin Zana is the capital city of which country?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
In which film would you find this African boy?

QUESTION 9
Who played Ayesha, immortal queen of the lost city of Kuma, in the Hammer film *She*?

QUESTION 10
Complete the title of this 1957 horror movie, which is centred on an African island: *Zombies Of* ___ ___.

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
Which member of the X-Men is the daughter of the princess of a Kenyan tribe?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
In which TV series would you find this African character?

QUESTION 13
In the 1932 Universal film *The Mummy*, what's the name of the resurrected Egyptian high priest played by Boris Karloff?

QUESTION 14
In *Heroes*, what power does the African shaman Usutu have?

QUESTION 15
Which 1995 movie features Amy, a gorilla whose sign language is translated into a digital voice?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Name this character, and the TV series he appears in.

QUESTION 17
Which comics writer created "Batman of Africa" Batwing?

QUESTION 18
Name the 2010 zombie film which was shot on location in Burkina Faso and Ghana.

QUESTION 19
In which YA series is Africa one country, called Zafrika? (Clue: In this alternate history, Britain goes by the name Albion.)

QUESTION 20
The *Exorcist* prequel movies are set in the Turkana region of Kenya. Name them both.

Answers
1 Kenya 2 Richard Stanley 3 Tade Thompson 4 *District 9* 5 Tunisia 6 All filmed in South Africa 7 Wakanda 8 *Exorcist II: The Heretic* 9 Ursula Andress 10 *Mora Tau* 11 Storm 12 *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* 13 Imhotep 14 He can paint the future 15 *Congo* 16 Mr Nancy/ *American Gods* 17 Grant Morrison 18 *The Dead* 19 *Noughts + Crosses* 20 *Dominion/Exorcist: The Beginning*

How did you do?

We have no clever system this time...

0-5 Dreadful
6-10 Disappointing
11-15 Decent
16-19 Very good
20 Genius

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SFX

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Future PLC, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Editor
Darren Scott
darren.scott@futurenet.com

Deputy Editor
Ian Berriman
ian.berriman@futurenet.com

Art Editor
Jonathan Coates
jonathan.coates@futurenet.com

Production Editor
Ed Ricketts
ed.ricketts@futurenet.com

Editor-at-large
Nick Setchfield

US Editor
Tara Bennett

Contributors
Calvin Baxter, Simon Bland, Saxon Bullock, Nicola Clarke, Hirun Cryer, Sarah Dobbs, Richard Edwards, Dave Golder, Stephen Jewell, Stephen Kelly, Jess Kinghorn, Catherine Kirkpatrick (design), Leila Latif, Jayne Nelson, Steve O'Brien, Will Salmon, Minyi Seo (design), Jack Shepherd, David West, James White, Jonathan Wright

Film Group, London
Editor Matt Maytum
Art Editor Andy McGregor
Deputy Editor Jordan Farley
Reviews Editor Matthew Leyland
News Editor Lauren Miles

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Media packs available on request
Commercial Director Clare Dove
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Head of Commercial Jon Restall jon.restall@futurenet.com
Account Manager Rosie Liddington
rosie.liddington@futurenet.com

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"You're going home in a [redacted] ambulance"

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE...

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PASS THE COMPOUND V

SFX 380 ON SALE 12 JUNE

DOCTOR WHO
YOU DIDN'T THINK WE HAD FINISHED?

A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE
LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS

MAXXXINE
SHE'S A FUCKING MOVIE STAR

HOUSE OF THE DRAGON
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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

WELCOME TO THE MONSTER MASH!
HE SURE GOT THE POINT!
I HAVE A REAL DRINK PROBLEM!
I CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHY GIRLS DON'T LIKE ME!
PARDON ME MISS— I LOST MY CONTACT LENSES!
I THINK YOU'VE GOT A SCREW LOOSE!
SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL VAMPIRE!
WAITER! THE STEAK IS TOO RARE!
SHOCKING LAFFS
RICK: What did Bambi say during her first date with Godzilla?
BOB: Somebody up there likes me!
DOCTOR: Nurse, did you take the patient's temperature?
NURSE: No doctor. Is it missing?
Throughout the ages, Dracula has been murdering others and draining their blood to keep himself alive! From "Dracula A.D. 1972" (1972).

Shock Theatre Cards

Nick Setchfield, Editor-At-Large

In 1976 the dank air of a Transylvanian tomb wafted into British newsagents. There, among the chocolate, sherbet and chews, lurked the gore-drenched delights of Shock Theatre bubblegum cards. Not that any kid ever cared about the stale wedge of chewable rubber and artificial flavouring tucked into every packet.

Each black, waxy wrapper bore the likeness of Christopher Lee as the king of the vampires, blood dripping from his chops as he declared "Sure doesn't taste like tomato juice!" It was a line that would never have troubled Lee's imperious lips – the script would have been flung in the director's face – but it set the tone for what waited inside.

The cards were illustrated with publicity stills from such Hammer movies as *The Satanic Rites Of Dracula*, *Dracula AD 1972* and *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed*, relatively recent releases that had seen the studio edge into harder, more gruesome fare. Framed by bright red borders, they delivered pure Grand Guignol, pushing the very limits of what could be considered kid-friendly: blood-smeared scenes of terror, agony and death.

Each lurid glimpse of the unspeakable was teamed with a groan-worthy end-of-the-pier gag. A shot of Lee with unholy stigmata leaking from his eyes was captioned, "I'm just a big cry-baby!" As Peter Cushing's Baron Frankenstein inspected a freshly extracted human brain floating in a tank the card wisecracked, "My goodness! You've brainwashed him!" An impaled Dracula protests, "I ordered 'steak' – not stake!"

Back then Hammer's output was slapped with X certificates in the cinemas and consigned to late-night screenings on TV. But in the '70s horror had a way of finding its way to kids, from the pages of *Monster Fun* comic to Count Dracula's Secret ice lollies. And we lapped it up, just like Lee's blood-crazed count.

But Shock Theatre was more than just a gateway drug to the hard stuff. Somehow those cheap gags defused the darkness, tamed the ghastly, took the edge off the shudders. They taught us that humour could be a crucifix, held up to the nightmares.

Nick would actually rather drink blood than tomato juice.

Fact Attack!

- **The cards were made by Topps, who would bring out phenomenally successful Star Wars sets a year later.**
- **The backs of the cards offered more jokes, billed as Shocking Laffs, along with a fact about the relevant film.**
- **There were 50 cards in the UK set, although strangely that included two number 17s and no number 47.**
- **Shock Theater, the US version, had a test run in 1975, with no number 17 but two number 47s...**
- **One card had the unusually straight caption "Dracula lives!" – also the name of the Count's British Marvel comic.**

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